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The LGBTQ I-Search: A Guided Tour

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The English classroom yields abundant opportunities to help make students more humane, or as they put it, "to learn how NOT to be jerks." Students have a pure sense of justice, but their actions are often inconsistent with the values that they believe that they hold. This pure sense of justice can prompt students to want to make their own world a better place, but the majority of their experiences teach them to value individualism, to look out for themselves above all else. English classrooms, while teaching students to research and write, can also teach students to think about how their research and writing can seek to make the world a better place by making it better for all people, not just oneself.

As a rookie Language Arts teacher in a struggling, rural school district, Dawn Harris faced a number of challenges in teaching her primarily African American eleventh graders to tackle tough social issues while they learned to conduct research. Dawn was faced with the daunting task of asking students to tackle social issues that deserve complex arguments and informed handling. She had to model for them how to explore many positions on issues that hit close to home, issues they often had difficulty discussing and articulating positions on. She had to ask her students to believe that others' positions were as worthy of consideration as their own; in the process, they learned that an important step in the process of education is listening to and validating the opinions and experiences of others. As they learned to listen with their emotions and with their minds, students slowly displayed subtle changes of mind and heart. These changes were incremental and minor but remarkable nonetheless, since humans tend to resist change.

The Platinum Rule sets the expectations for the journey described in this article. Killerman (2013) explores the drawbacks of teaching students to reuse the golden rule (pp. 21-24). The golden rule establishes a justification to discriminate: if we are doing to others what we would like to have done unto us, our judgment is the standard by which we abide, and others' judgments are not relevant. When

students are encouraged to treat others the ways that they would want to be treated, they are projecting their desires and their understandings of the world onto others. Killerman (2013) instead advocates the "platinum rule": "Do unto others as they would have done unto them" (p. 23). This requires a tremendous shift that reflects empathy rather than a self-centered viewpoint. The platinum rule requires that we get to know individuals and give them the power to define themselves and to say what is important about the way we treat them. This perfectly illustrates the danger of the single voice. And, the danger of the single story makes us highly recommend multiple tour guides for any journey through understandings about LGBTQ cultures.

The Invitation

It can be forced and clunky to set out on a journey with travelers when we have not been invited. Dawn had to capture the moment when her students showed interest in taking a journey. Had she introduced the subject of LGBTQ issues in the classroom without student permission and without support from the community, she may have had a different response. She captured a subject that students repeatedly raised as a serious issue, interpreting student interest as an invitation. Incidentally, this student interest coincided with an upcoming research project. In the spirit of the i-search, Dawn allowed students to identify a destination that was of interest to them. Invitation accepted.

Shor (1992) introduces the writing classroom as most motivating when students are writing about a subject that matters to them, that they consider crucial, and about which they feel that they can affect change. When students are led on the journey of solving problems through writing, their ideas are conveyed more thoroughly and their points demonstrated clearly (Shor, 1992). While guiding her junior students through the process of research, Dawn wanted to give her students the chance to connect personally with the topics they chose to explore. The Common Core demands

that in their research students "solve problems" and "synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation" (W. 11-12.7). This forced Dawn to ask the question "How do I meet the demands of the Common Core, yet help students to fully engage with personal topics in their research?" It was time to call in reinforcements. Dawn knew traveling with students on this journey would take commitment, collaboration, and a lot of on-the-spot guidance.

The Travelers

While it is important to take students out of their comfort zones in order to help them learn to thoroughly argue a point, it is crucial that students engage in the journey with competent guides. Students respond best to persons with whom they have healthy personal relationships. Subject matter also has the potential of being more "sticky" in their minds if it is presented through personal testimony; the voices of individuals affected by circumstances are often the only voices that can bring about lasting impact on opinions. The tour guides had specific roles.

Dawn has a biracial identity that enables her frequent modeling of appropriate use of formal and informal language, or code switching (Baker, 2008), from formal didactic statement to informal correction and expression of positive regard: "I love you, D, and I saw whatchu did. So, class, I want you to respond to this session by recording three exploratory questions…" She talks to the students about social issues, and she pushes them to think about what they can do to make their world a better place. She assumes that her students have good hearts, are hard-working, and are capable of extraordinary things. The students know that she is heterosexual, a mother, and married to a man of Korean descent. While Dawn has the personal connection needed to gain the trust of her students to engage in sensitive discussions, she felt it would benefit both her and her students to have the support of someone accomplished in the study of cultural diversity, social issues and bias. Dawn wanted to make certain her conversations remained neutral and open-minded to ensure students arrived at opinions derived from their own interpretations of the information presented, so she invited Christa to consult.

Christa teaches courses that prompt students to recognize their biases and develop tools to engage in authentic and culturally responsive experiences with students and communities. In Dawn's classroom, Christa is co-planning and riding quietly in the back seat. The students see her, say hello, offer her a piece of gum (how did they know?), and turn their attention to Dawn. During this unit, Dawn reflects with Christa daily on classroom discussions and student interactions as they prepare to stop at each waypoint on this journey. Together, Christa and Dawn seek a resource who will provide students with real-life connections to the topic at hand—an expert on the life students live, someone close to them, someone in their community who breathes the same air they were born into. Enter Ms. J.

Ms. J, an African-American mother of nine children, five of whom attended this high school, heavily influences the school's culture of openness and support for LGBTQ youth. She is also a recovering bully. In this world, there are a few who have transformed unimaginable trials into compelling and deeply empowering challenges for others; Ms. J has that gift. For years, Ms. J found that fighting provided her with outlet, security, and control. "I liked fighting, even when I lost. I felt like I had control over me, over my moves, over when I felt like stopping." When she wanted to fight her children's teachers, it was one school board member who took her aside and told her, "You're so angry. You could get so much further if you were sweet." So, she tried; and she discovered the power of dialogue. She has become devoted to being non-threatening and open, caring for and listening to others, turning her pain into exhortations, and living out the belief that the collective journey is far superior to the solitary one. Mrs. J's passion for reaching out to and supporting the LGBTQ community, along with her cultural fluency within the student body, made her an ideal candidate to act as a primary resource in the students' discussion about sexual orientation differences.

Two hundred students attend this high school, 95% of whom are African American, in a small community on the edge of a rapidly shrinking Midwest city. School personnel re-direct misbehaving students through family-like relationships rather than from top-down zero tolerance policies. And teachers are enabled with dominant roles in those relationships, too, with around fifteen students per class. The stereotypes of urban youth as street-smart, savvy, and hard-core can mask the very real diversity of these students—the shy, the thoughtful, the affectionate, the quietly rejected, the careful, the funny, the sensitive, the compassionate.

The Itinerary

Planning where we expect to take students incorporates the backward design that streamlines a unit. Backward design is a process of building a unit that begins with the end in mind, by creating the final assessment, and proceeds by creating the assignments that will cause student success on the final assessment (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). We designed as the final assignment an i-search research project; when students raised the topic of LGBTQ issues, Dawn seized this opportunity both to equip students for success with their own research and to model productive discussion around peer response to LGBTQ identities.

Dawn wanted to model research that takes risky journeys and collects choruses of voices around a social issue affecting youth. Dawn introduced the i-search paper as a research paper in which students acknowledge the self as they search and employ the first person voice to describe how their minds changed or expanded as they discovered new information around a topic. We facilitated thinking broadly about places where they could find data and about how the hearing of many voices yields profound collective wisdom around an issue. Dawn explained to the students that when these projects were finished, students would host a forum in which they, as individuals or with partners, would present journeys and findings to their peers. They would choose an effective presentation method (ie., construct a public service announcement, host a talk show, or provide an instructional segment). The goal was to get others in the school to examine their attitudes toward a variety of social issues and to offer feasible and compelling challenges for social action. In this way, Dawn enabled a conversation around LGBTQ issues as a model for a response project that students would then complete.

The i-search research format dictates that students can find valuable information in both formal and informal formats and that any information that students find may serve as evidence in the problem they will address or the argument they will make. Dawn led students in discovery research that would model how to explore a topic in relation to themselves. Some of their findings were: In the eleventh grade classrooms, none of the thirty-odd students have openly identified themselves to teachers or students as LGBTQ. But, if these students mirror a typical cross-section of young adults, at least three of them will identify as LGBTQ as adults. They discovered that LGBTQ students who report being harassed more often than others have lower grade point averages than those who report being harassed less often (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, & Palmer, 2012). Also, sixty percent of LGBTQ teens harassed in school did not report the incidents to adults; one third of those who did report incidents said adults did nothing (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, & Palmer, 2012). Another fact identified was that students who are interpreted by peers as not performing within socially constructed gender boundaries are two to four times more likely to drop out of high school, be homeless, abuse substances, and commit suicide (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). Dawn discussed with students that while we cannot generalize about groups of people, we can usually assume that if we encounter a person who is LGBTQ, that person is likely to have experiences that conform to this research.

Through our model topic, discrimination based on LGBTQ identity, we demonstrated that students could search for additional information from informal research sources such as survey, film, brochure, and first- and second-person interview. They completed surveys. They accessed testimony by viewing the film Bullied, (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011) a story about a gay man who won a court trial after being beaten, urinated on, sexually assaulted, and daily taunted through middle and high school because of his sexual orientation. They listened to and questioned Ms. J, hearing her as a respected community voice, as she shared share once-removed accounts of what she sees working with LGBTQ youth, and Dawn listened to the students.

Then, Dawn questioned the students toward discovering their own ideas about social treatment of people who identify as LGBTQ, questioning them about implications of information about prevalence of depression, isolation, homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide among LGBTQ youth. Along the way, the students produced the information to construct class-wide discoveries that wonderfully modeled the research process while compelling them to engage in a conversation about an issue that they walk past, sit beside, overhear, quickly identify in the hallways, and, above all, never discuss in classrooms.

Waypoints and Snapshots

A glance through the highlights of our trip romanticizes the process, makes us and our students look clean and polished, and doesn't reflect the unexpected events we encountered. When Dawn announced that the students would be discussing issues around persons who were LGBTQ, some laughed a little harder than usual, some commented under

their breath, some sucked their teeth, some rolled their eyes, and others remained unusually silent; it was that lack of response that most surprised her.

> Dawn: "Hey, people who are LGBTQ have rights too."
> Students: "Don't be bringin' that up in my face."
> Dawn:"Why?."
> Students: "Because, man. I mean, how can I save the world when I'm still trying to save myself?"

Dawn recalls thinking through the lens of her teacher idealism, assuming that her passion would automatically ignite student motivation. Clearly for this group, it wasn't just mid-winter in the Midwest having a distinct cooling effect on the passions; frankly, they just didn't think this was about them. Also, they could see right through this smoke screen; there was a research paper behind all this. Dawn had assumed that since most of the students lacked racial or social class power, they would see some universality among the many discriminations. Instead, they mainly gravitated toward what they could publicly relate to; not a single student would share an account of an LGBTQ person who s/he knew personally (though we wonder how many of them may have been covering for selves or friends).

Dawn recalls, "I should have known when they had trouble defining the word 'empathy' that this was going to be a process." Dawn and Christa were surprised that every single student answered "true" when asked on the pre-film survey if they knew that nine out of ten LGBT students were bullied regularly. They even seemed baffled that a survey would ask a question with such an obvious answer. The sentiment was, "Of course we know gays get bullied. Duh." Vittrup (2007) found that students who are exposed to multiculturally affirmative messages through media did not pick up on those messages until they had conversations with adults explicitly about those messages. Dawn's questioning adjusted the focus: "Now what are we going to do about it?" There was a clear and dominant consensus on the importance of self-preservation. To the question, "Which is a bigger issue: bullying or sexual orientation?" students answered, "Bullying, because I can get bullied." The gay student being urinated on in the film was what upset them the most; it was audibly difficult for many of them. Because some students had shown such acceptance of Dawn as an individual despite their open aversion to inter-racial marriages in general, she had expected more empathy toward the individual story in the film. Through it all, in this leg of the journey, Dawn had introduced students to the effectiveness of surveys in identifying legitimate social issues and forced them to explore both broad and narrow research questions.

As Dawn invited deliberative conversation about discrimination toward persons who identify as LGBTQ, the students freely expressed their discomfort with possibility of affection or attraction between persons who are LGBTQ:

> "This kid be workin' it harder than the girls. Don't be bringin' that up in my face. You can't come up to every guy . . ."
> "That's just like you tryin' to come up to every girl. Same thing."
> "No, it's not."
> "Yes, it is."
> "No, IT'S NOT."

When Christa explained to students that approximately one-tenth of adults in the U.S. identify as LGBTQ, one student led with a quick nose-touch accompanied by a loud "NOT IT!" He was joined by a chorus of others, also openly identifying themselves as "NOT IT." It became clear quickly that while students not only didn't want to see others act out what they perceived were LGBTQ behaviors, they very decisively wanted others not to question their heterosexual identity. Christa followed up with a question, and the students walked with her through an examination of the implications of their actions:

> "What message does your disassociation send? Why is it important to you that others see you as NOT LGBTQ?"
> Their answers exposed clear social boundaries:
> "That it's not good to be gay."
> "That others won't like me as much if I am gay."
> "That I better keep my sexual orientation a secret if I want to fit in."
> "That some people have to choose between showing their sexual orientation and being accepted."

At this point, students connected the dots about their homophobic performances: "Maybe it's people saying 'not it' that makes these kids want to drop out of school or hurt themselves."

Another avenue Dawn was able to demonstrate was strength of personal testimony. In research, personal testimony can have a profound effect on the way one argues a perspective. However, the testimony in this film didn't seem to change students' belief systems. Both Dawn and Christa did not realize until later that the personal testimony in the film was that of a white male student. The majority of voices that are more often "heard" in both fiction and non-fiction

are those of white people and usually those of males; we reinforced this stereotype, and in so doing, reminded students whose voices are deemed as the most important in our culture, depriving them of the chance to hear a voice as much as possible like their own.

Because of the importance of including a voice to which students could relate, Dawn identified Ms. J, a mother figure who was devoted to informing others about LGBTQ issues students were exploring. Walking from the office to the classroom, Ms. J gives and receives affectionate greetings from so many students that to walk with her is one of the best ways to authentically meet students and one of the most certain ways to be late to class; 2.5% of the student body lives under her roof, and the rest know that if they needed a home, they would be a welcome addition. She tells one student to pull up his pants and gets results before she even finishes her sentence. When she is speaking to the class, she calls one student out for sleeping and another for distracting, and she wins consistent eye contact with them for the rest of the period. She is the sort of parent who will grab a student by the ear and drag her/him to the office, says Dawn. Dawn hears students tell one another to stop picking on kids and be careful what they say around Ms. J. She is a trusted voice who will provide personal stories that will shape perspectives and viewpoints. This type of trusted interaction from a reliable source is vital to effective research.

Ms. J tells the students that she first became convicted about the lack of community support for students identifying as LGBTQ when a high school boy in her neighborhood was kicked out of his home for coming out to his parents. She didn't, however, find out from the boy. She found out from his parents who, seeking support for their rejection of their son, went to neighbors' homes to warn them about their son's sexual orientation should he contact them. Ms. J responded by searching for the student for several months before finding him and offering to let him stay with her family, where he still lives. He told her that a lot of people indicated quasi-support, but "It is a lot easier to crash on someone's couch if you're straight. People afraid I'm gonna turn you or leave some disease on your couch." Still, she consistently demonstrates for students how to recognize first the person and much later the sexual orientation: "I didn't take him in because he is gay; I took him in because he was thrown out." Students began to connect research to her story. LGB youth whose families do not approve of their sexual orientation are more than eight times more likely to attempt suicide (Family Acceptance Project, 2009, n.p.). She told us that this

issue is so vital that she and her husband fund anti-bullying campaigns in schools, frequently approach homeless youth to offer support, and invite community members to their home where they conduct informative ally-building and LGBTQ youth-empowering sessions. She whispers to Dawn and Christa between classes that some of these students have attended these sessions in her home, and we suspect again that some of the silent students could be avoiding social pressure by covering for themselves or their loved ones.

During peer-to-peer discussions and in interaction with teachers and guests, boys were the more dominant contributors to the classroom conversation; boys also steered the theme. Since boys interrupt girls four to eight times more often than girls interrupt boys, and, unchecked, they often dominate conversation (Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman, 2009), Dawn stepped in to defend the girls' right to finish a statement, and she often repeated what both girls and quiet boys said. Homophobia is rooted in dislike of the feminine, and boys tend to more heavily police against feminized behaviors in boys and girls (Jhally, 2013); male dominance in these classroom conversations attacking persons who were LGBTQ demonstrated this.

What was notable about the gendered conversation was that girls almost always defended LGBTQ individuals' actions that were stereotypical feminine behaviors, and boys almost consistently criticized the same feminized behaviors in the film (ie., not fighting back, not responding with violence). "He's feminine because he didn't fight back." Male students were reinforcing the "sissy" stereotype, implying that a boy who doesn't fight back for himself isn't a boy. "They both made me mad—the bully and the kid getting bullied." "He should've hit 'em one good time—that'd learn 'em." "He let it happen. If he'd just fight back, they would've known." Students were not quick to explore the complexity around a victim often not having power for or not benefiting from defending her/himself. We reflected later on the possibility that the feminine genders and heterosexuality of Dawn and Ms. J could have influenced oppositional responses from males in the classroom, which would reinforce the need to invite anti-biased male guest speakers into the conversation.

Dawn was concerned that youth realize the direct and instant effect their actions could have on others. On average, each instance of verbal or physical bullying about sexual orientation increases by 2.5 the likelihood that an LGBTQ person will engage in self-harm (Mustanski, Garofalo & Emerson, 2010). Also, LGBTQ high-school-aged youth are four to six times more likely to make a suicide attempt that will

require medical treatment than heterosexual youth (CDC, 2011). Students were able to identify the culturally constructed response to most power-based discrimination that they see: "Keep movin'. It ain't got nothin' to do with you." As the students work through responses to these issues, Ms. J tells them, "It has everything to do with you, with your own future when you do your part to save the world, to make the world you in live a better place. How do you know that you tryin' won't help? I'm glad that when I was young and I tried to die, somebody saved me. When does it become the responsibility of everyone else to do something if we don't change what we don't like? If you don't do anything, when does it become your problem too? Does it ever become your problem to help someone else? That kid may be goin' home every day and want to die. It's not that you agree with what he is doing, it's that you agree with him being alive." We watched Ms. J's voice have a much more emotive effect on the students than the research and statistics we had presented. What should we do when we see oppression?

Ms. J: "Fight back."

Students: "How?"

Ms. J: "Don't be a bystander, for starters."

Students: "What if people don't listen?"

Ms. J and Dawn: "You just did. You just did."

The final words of a conversation are often clearly indicative of where student thought arrives, and, for us, they are certainly the most memorable. Just after the bell rang, just after Ms. J and Dawn had directed intensified reflection on personal responsibility in a community, a male student, collecting his books and walking out, said, "How can I save the world?" Another male student, without missing a beat, added, "When I'm still tryin' to save myself?" Dawn nodded, pursed her lips, and kept nodding, comprehending the dilemma of that tension: students are trying to empathize in the midst of some of their own extraordinarily blinding difficulties.

These boys did not yet see the connection between speaking up for others and making the world a better place for themselves. They were still thinking as individuals, still a distance from seeing value in the collective defense of the disenfranchised. Dawn and Christa, however, were encouraged that they were asking questions. This is the kind of questioning students must acknowledge before beginning their journey to changing viewpoints through research. Students must have a vested interest in the issue at hand. They must know where to find the information they need to influence the perspectives of others. They need to hear from a variety of sources words that will help them raise their voices to affect change, in and out of their own communities.

Throughout the journey, both Dawn and Christa explored ways to enable youth to see similarities between the discriminations that they endure and those discriminations they inflict and, in turn, reflect about their own empathies toward others who endure other types of discrimination. We were surprised, moved, challenged, and we find ourselves still reflecting on the route we took; we find students wanting to revisit the original conversations, to reminisce about the journey and continue to explicate meaning from the experiences they had and connect them to new conversations. This was our best-case scenario, because in the end, students were left with the tools, skills, and more importantly, the desire to do important, life-altering research.

Returning from the Journey

The students gave us the words that outline our hopes for all of their journeys: Our hope is that students experience a transition from, "Don't be bringing that up in my face," to, "How can I save the world when I'm still trying to save myself," and finally to, "Now, I'm ready to fight back, but how?" We were so insistent that our students hear multiple voices around an issue, but it was ultimately our hearing of their voices that cautioned us and guided our reflections to adjust our future teaching. We had to respond aggressively to their subtle invitations, because conversation about empathetic responses to the unique experiences of LGBTQ individuals does not naturally occur.

When teachers and parents work together, student response and engagement increases, and credibility is reinforced when several respected voices speak together. We learned not to assume students will respond to social issues sensitively; we learned that students have their own belief systems—which adults often ignore; we learned that the worlds in which students live shape perceptions we couldn't have predicted; and most importantly, we learned that getting students in the conversation helps to broaden their worlds and ultimately, their perceptions. Ms. J, Dawn, the students, and their lessons cannot be replicated, nor is this scenario a clear model; it's a tour guide for teachers contemplating similar expeditions.

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To work toward a world, starting with
the one we live in, where people can grow
up knowing who they are — not only knowing
who they are, but to claim who they are — not to have
all kinds of false starts, not to have to spend tons of
energy in covering up who they are, not to have it a big
traumatic event to come out, but a *celebration* within
a context that is there for them."

Milt Ford, 2011 Interview
A People's History of the LGBTQ Community in Grand Rapids

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