Queering Space: Creating Safe Space for LGBTQ Youth in Your Library

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Words and phrases such as, "fag," "faggot," "fairy," "sissy," "homo," "that's so gay," "dyke," "lesbo," and "fruit" are still commonly used in youth culture to denote something negative. For example, a teacher gives a class an unwanted assignment. Student response: "That's so gay." A guy misses a basketball shot in gym class. Peer comment: "What a fag." A girl wears out-of-style footwear to school. Peer comment: "Total lesbo." To deny that these homophobic slurs are not still common place in our (youth) culture is problematic to our role as social justice advocates. These words and phrases "label, situate, categorize, define, delimit, and reinforce the positioning of sexual minorities as 'other.'" (Schrader & Wells, 2004). It is important to be aware of the reappropriation of some of these words by LGBTQ persons, while doing your best to prevent the use of these words in a derogatory way by youth in your library and community. The best way to eliminate negative views of homosexuality is through exposure to positive representations.

Queer Space

Literature provides a great avenue for youth to explore and experience the world, love, relationships, and sexuality in a safe, self-paced way. It can also provide

recognition, acceptance, and validation of one's feelings and experiences. Having a sizable collection of materials (fiction and nonfiction) available for LGBTQ youth is, thus, imperative. It is also important not to treat LGBTQ content and resources as "other" while still making them visible within the collection. Therefore, having appropriate tags that allow LGBTQ material to be easily searched within the catalogue is vital. Staff must be properly trained and have awareness of LGBTQ youth concerns, and familiarity with local resource centres and other local information resources for referral. In collection development and programming, your library must resist giving into complaints and pressure from conservative patrons/community to censor material with homosexual themes. Policies can easily be invoked to counter an attack of this nature. Revisit your collections and assess services being provided for and about LGBTQ communities, taking note of the national and international principles and polices that uphold the legislative and ethical framework for social justice advocacy of LGBTQ youth (Schrader & Wells, 2004). Finally, make sure LGBTQ youth have access to unfiltered computers, as many software filtering products used in schools and public libraries censor LGBTQ content (Schrader & Wells, 2004). Some LGBTQ youth may feel more comfortable searching for information and resources on their own, in a private manner, and internet access is the best way to provide this outlet.

Queer Fiction: A Brief History

Reflecting a society of fear and lack of acceptance, mid-20th century fiction materials presented a negative view of homosexuality and gay and lesbian people, focusing on the following views:

- Being gay is wrong

- It is just a phase/youthful experimentation
- Caused by dysfunctional family or early life trauma
- No happy ending for homosexual protagonist
- Doomed to life of isolation
- Prone to violence
- Strongly discouraged
- Physically dangerous to be gay
- Relationships are mysterious/undeveloped
- Gay men want to be women/ lesbians want to be men
- Gay is white, male, middle/upper class
- No such thing as a gay person
- Gay adults should not be around children because they are predatory and want to influence youth (Mulholland, 2003).

Over time a positive change in society's views about homosexuality has taken place, and this positive change has been reflected in fiction. Especially due to the increase in LGBTQ authors writing with a personal understanding, more recent fiction displays the following characteristics:

- Gay characters are accepted part of daily life
- Life does not revolve around sexuality
- Still predominantly white male
- Increase in books where parents are gay
- Positive presentation of gay characters
- Talks about relationships between people
- Explores emotional and mental aspects of homosexuality (Mulholland, 2003).

This does not suggest that older works of gay and lesbian fiction should not be in your collection or suggested reading material,

but rather that we be aware of the negative views presented in these works so that we can inform our patrons of them when we are providing readers' advisory. These negative views also provide excellent discussion points in book clubs.

Creating Queer Community and Allies

One way to attract queer youth to your library is through programming. Being aware of local resources for referral is important, but let's not just refer our queer youth to other organizations. Let's make them part of our community. A few ways to do this include having a book club of LGBTQ authors and content for queer youth and allies, and promote it as such; organize or promote gay/straight alliance groups within your library or community; put up queer-friendly displays in the YA section; select a book or two with LGBTQ content for non-queer-specific youth book clubs. Remember: it is important to expose all youth to LGBTQ content, to promote tolerance, acceptance, and diverse perspectives, as well as to fight against heteronormative, heterosexist, and homophobic views prevalent in our culture. Working to build a community of tolerance and acceptance will create a welcoming safe space for queer youth to join your community.

Some Noteworthy Queer Canadian Titles

Coyote, Ivan E. (2012). *One in Every Crowd.* Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Ivan Coyote's first book for young adults, *One in Every Crowd* is a compilation of honest, real, and touching short stories about Coyote's own experiences growing up queer. Although directed at queer and questioning youth, these stories will appeal

to anyone who has ever felt different, excluded, or misunderstood. These candid and introspective stories are organized with an overall narrative flow that follows Coyote from childhood to adult life. This book is hard to put down, as each gripping story pulls the reader in and beckons them to read on. Although sad and bittersweet at times, overall Coyote's words are quite comforting.

Leth, Kate. (2012). *Ultimate Kate or die!* [comic book]. Kateordiecomics.com (self-published).

Kate Leth started posting her *Kate or Die!* comics online in 2011, and this first issue of *Ultimate Kate or Die!* is a compilation of these webcomics put into print. Leth's work is a laugh-out-loud, feel-good comic, containing mostly true stories about her life as a queer woman, living in Halifax, and working in the comic book industry. She tackles serious topics such as feminism, social anxiety, and serious struggles she had growing up, as well as universally relevant, humorous depictions of daily life situations, such as embarrassing moments, social media mishaps, and social etiquette. Insightful, empowering, and hilarious comics like these do not come around enough. Since only some of Leth's comics focus on biphobia and queer sexuality, her comics are great to introduce to allies and heterosexual youth to provide them with a positive representation of queer and to show them that homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is only one aspect of a person's identity rather than all encompassing. You can follow Leth's comics as she writes them at kateordiecomics.com.

Other Titles

Dunnion, Kristyn. (2004). *Mosh Pit.* Markham: Red Deer Press.

Dunnion, Kristyn. (2008). *Big, Big Sky.* Markham: Red Deer Press.

Francis, Brian. (2004). *Fruit.* Toronto: ECW Press.

Goobie, Beth. (2006). *Hello, Groin.* Victoria: Orca Book Publishers.

Goto, Hiromi. (2009). *Half World.* Toronto: Penguin.

Goto, Hiromi. (2013). *Darkest Light.* Toronto: Penguin.

Huser, Glen. (2003). *Stitches*. Toronto: Groundwood Books.

Mac, Carrie. (2006). *Crush*. Victoria: Orca Book Publishers.

McCormack, Derek. (1996). *Dark rides: A novel in stories.* Toronto: Coach   House Books.

Rainfield, Cheryl. (2010). *Scars.* Toronto: Westside Books.

Rooney, Francis. (2004). *Hear me out: True studies of teens educating and confronting homophobia.* Toronto: Second Story Press.

Spoon, Rae. (2012). *First spring grass fire.* Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Stevenson, Robin. (2009). *Inferno.* Toronto: Penguin.

Tamaki, Mariko. (2012). *(You) Set Me on Fire.* Toronto: Penguin.

Withrow, Sarah. (2001). *Box Girl.* Toronto: Groundwood Books.

Some Useful Resources

Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. (www.clga.ca)

The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives is the second largest LGBTQ archives in the world. Their mandate is to acquire, preserve, organize, and provide public access to information and materials by and about LGBTQ people, that have primarily been produced in or concern Canada. This is a great resource for students conducting research on LGBTQ materials.

Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition. (www.rainbowhealth.ca)

Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition is a hub for health and wellness information for LGBTQ persons. The site is available in both French and English, and provides links to other health and wellness sites across Canada. There are also links to lots of publications about LGBTQ people, youth, anti-gay violence, LGBTQ parenting, and more.

Egale Canada: Advancing equality, diversity, education and justice. (www.egale.ca).

Egale Canada Human Rights Trust is Canada's national charity promoting LGBTQ human rights through research, education and community engagement. This site provides links to MyGSA.ca and provides information about resource kits and facilitator training for developing safe and

inclusive environments. The site also provides resources for victims of hate crimes and support for families of LGBTQ persons.

My Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). (www.mygsa.ca).

My GSA is a website dedicated to promoting LGBTQ-inclusive and safer schools movements. It provides resources for LGBTQ, questioning, and allied youth, parents, and educators. The purpose of the site is to provide information and resources that will assist in the development of a GSA or other safer space club. The site provides resources such as book lists, movie suggestions, activity ideas, lesson plans, and stories and testimonies from participants in GSA projects, both students and educators.

Definitions to Become Familiar with

*Homophobia is the fear of homosexuals and homosexuality that can be expressed by feelings of discomfort in the presence of gays and lesbians by rejecting them and by verbally or physically abusing them. Homophobia is often used as an umbrella term for all feelings of fear and dislike directed toward gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. Homophobia can be institutional, societal or internalised.

*Societal or cultural homophobia is the homophobia that permeates all aspects of social life, and relates to the social and cultural norms that promote heterosexuality, gender norms, and the discrimination against GLBT people. Homosexuality is always considered as 'different': to be welcomed, tolerated, or despised. The media, film, TV, books, holiday brochures, insurance companies, religious institutions, and schools all back this up.

*Institutional or organisational homophobia is systematic discrimination of GLBT people by government, business, employers, public services, and other organizations. It happens when a company invites an employee and their husband or wife to an event, explicitly excluding same sex relationships, or when the family membership to a fitness club only mentions opposite sex partnerships. This exclusion is not necessarily deliberate, but it means that institutions have not considered same sex partners as an option. In schools this can emerge in sex and relationships education sessions which tend to focus on heterosexuality as the accepted norm for all students.

*Internalised homophobia happens when one integrates society's ideas on homosexuality and turns this homophobia against her/himself or the against the GLBT community. Individuals that internalise homophobia will hate themselves for being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and will feel valued if they reject everything GLBT.

*Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is better and superior than homosexuality. In a heterosexist society, heterosexuality is more desirable, therefore until proven otherwise, it is assumed that people are heterosexuals.

Sexism is the belief that maleness in its traditional stereotypical gender role is superior to other sexes. "Sexism is still the popular weapon of homophobia. The modern definition of gayness, frequently defined as 'sissy,' as 'effeminacy,' and hence as weakness, is rooted in male superiority, and in the harsh sexism of male privilege, power, and hegemony." (Schrader & Wells, 2004).

Heteronormative is the belief and attitude that sees heterosexuality as the normal sexual orientation and traditional roles of male and female are privileged. Heteronormative discourse marginalizes and 'others' any person(s) who does not fit into this narrow male/female dichotomy of sex and gender roles.

**Queer: Used as an umbrella identity term encompassing lesbian, questioning people, gay men, bisexuals, non-labeling people, transgender folks, and anyone else who does not strictly identify as heterosexual. "Queer" originated as a derogatory word. Currently, it is being reclaimed by some people and used as a statement of empowerment. Some people identify as "queer" to distance themselves from the rigid categorization of "straight" and "gay".

The above definitions marked with (*) were taken from Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition (http://www.rainbowhealth.ca/english/homophobia.html)

The above definitions marked with (**) were taken from University of Michigan. (http://internationalspectrum.umich.edu/life/definitions). For more LGBTQ terms and definitions visit the University of Michigan's website.

Resources:

Mulholland, R. (2003). Gay and lesbian fiction: A history and a review of Canadian fiction materials. *Resource Links, 8*, 55-58. Retrieved from http://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/215243126?accountid=10406

Schrader, A. M., & Wells, K. (2004). Queer perspectives on social responsibility in Canadian schools and library. *School Libraries in Canada, 24*(4), 8-37. Retrieved from http://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/222484453?accountid=10406