Heterosexism in the Classroom

Daniel Kaplin MA, CASAC
College of Staten Island
City University of New York

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to distinguish between heterosexism and apply this principle to the classroom setting. The implications of heterosexism are introduced. Several common scenarios where classroom management could be useful are presented. The article concludes with practical advice creating an inclusive environment.

Key Words: heterosexism, classroom management, Safe Zone training, self-disclosure, sexual humor.
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Heterosexism refers to a belief that everyone is heterosexual and that this is the preferable sexual orientation (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Garcia, 2009). This is not to be confused with homophobia, which refers to an irrational fear of someone that is homosexual (Garcia, 2009; Hodges & Parkes, 2005). The Heterosexism can be an overt view or more commonly an implicit bias that a person acquires through socialization (Garcia, 2009; Lance, 2002). The goals of this article are to address how implicit biases of heterosexism occur in the classroom and provide suggestions for a more inclusive atmosphere.

Why it Matters

One might ask, “If heterosexism is merely a bias towards the heterosexual orientation, what is the big deal?” In other words, perhaps heterosexism is innocuous and does not need to be addressed. To address this concern, researchers have found that heterosexism and homophobia serve as the foundation of acceptance and propagation of hate crimes (Cowan, Heiple, Marquez, Khatchadourian, & McNevin, 2005). Garcia (2009) notes that heterosexism is associated with violence, vandalism, and discrimination. Consequently, heterosexism might be viewed as a gateway to homophobia and hate crimes.

Applications of Heterosexism

As noted above, a subtle example of heterosexism is to assume that everyone is heterosexual (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Garcia, 2009). As a professor, I have experienced incidents where students use heterosexist language regarding relationship dyads. A second example of heterosexism can be seen when a student feels compelled to announce their personal sexual orientation as heterosexual (Garcia, 2009). A third observation is the lack of sensitivity when it comes to sexually-based jokes (Jewell & Morrison, 2010).

Reducing Heterosexism

In response to the situations presented above, it is imperative that the instructor set the tone of the class. This includes using gender neutral examples when talking about relationships (Garcia, 2009). For example, I tend to use the term “romantic interest” as a way of ensuring that all students feel comfortable. Other neutral terms such as “significant other” and “partner” are more inclusive terms (Garcia, 2009). If a student uses heterosexist language to discuss general relationships, I tend to ask questions like, “why does it necessarily have to be a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife?” This encourages a student to explore the possibility of other types of relationships (Garcia, 2009).

In response to a person feeling compelled to announce their sexual orientation, a professor could reassure students that their sexual orientation is not required to be disclosed (Ferfolja, 2007). This protects the sexual orientation of both heterosexual and homosexual students. In psychologically driven classes, a professor could also reflect on why the student feels that it is important to discl-
ose their sexual orientation as it could be relevant to personality style (Kim & Drolet, 2003). As a general rule, a professor should refrain from using the terms like “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” to discuss a person’s relationship unless it is first volunteered by a student.

A professor has to be exceedingly careful when using sexually-charged humor. Some researchers have found utility in sexual humor in creating a relaxed environment, but it is possible that a joke could be taken in an unintended way, which could make students feel uncomfortable (Adams, 1974; Philaretou, 2005; Schreier, 1995). Moreover, the professor sets the tone of the classroom. As a result, if a professor hears an inappropriate joke, it is imperative for them to address it because silence could be perceived as a tacit agreement with a joke.

A final recommendation is that both professors and students do Safe Zone training if possible. This training can help teach the skills that will reduce pre-established negative affect (if applicable) and help promote the most inclusive environment (Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Rye & Meaney, 2009). Once a professor receives this training, they can hang the sign outside their door signifying that they are an “Ally,” which encourages support and open discussion regarding issues pertaining to the LGBTQ community (Draughn et al., 2002). Research suggests that exposure has a profound impact on homophobia and one’s level of discomfort expressing individual differences at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003; Lance, 2002).

References


