Moving across Differences

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Moving across Differences: How Students Engage LGBTQ+ Themes in a High School Literature Class.


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Conclusion

Moving and Giving toward Ethical Encounters

In part, this book strives to add to the conversation about young people reading, writing, and talking about LGBTQ+-themed literature by documenting those who do so in a school that strove to be queer-friendly and in a semester-long course for which students earned credit. It is a distinctive project in that way. Students were not assumed to be straight or cisgender, homophobic or transphobic. In these ways, it was like literacy groups in LGBTQ+ youth centers. Except the conversations included straight and cis people, as well, and the students earned credit for their work. LGBTQ+-themed literature was not taught as if it were taboo. It was not the focus of a singular lesson or embedded in a theme for a singular unit. It did not come up as an aside because one student braved initiating the topic. Rather, a wide range of LGBTQ+-themed literature was read, written about, and discussed, over an extended period of time. As such, the texts we shared were by and about diverse LGBTQ+ people. Not only were BT+ people included, when historically they have not been, but so too were multiple races, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities. As a result, the literature we shared could sometimes for some people assume the role of mirrors, other times for other people act as windows, and still other times act as doors (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Sims Bishop, 1990). Further, some of this literature fell into Cart and Jenkins’s (2006) categories of homosexual visibility and gay assimilation, but much of it fell into their queer community or queer consciousness category. In Adichie’s (2009) words, we could avoid “the danger of a single story.”

1. I quote Adichie here although it gives me pause. Certainly this concept is one that I value, but I must acknowledge that in the years since her TED talk, Adichie has asserted that trans women are not women (Crockett, 2017) and therefore has been rightfully critiqued for being a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF).
This does not, however, solve the dilemma articulated by Kumashiro (2001) about inclusion. Having the time and space to include more LGBTQ+-themed literature does not mean the course ever will or even can fully represent LGBTQ+ people or communities. There is always a point where individual people distinguish themselves from their communities and thus from one another. So, as a complement to inclusion, this study offers movement. While every person or community will never be included in any curriculum, curricula and pedagogy together can be used by teachers and students to provoke movement—movement in and out and around various communities to learn from, to learn with, and to teach one another. Movement depends on agility; movement is prevented by ossification. Encounters, ethical or otherwise, depend on movement. By exploring movement between, among, and within encounters and reflecting on related ethics, this study makes a theoretical contribution to this empirical body of literature.

Those of us in the LGBTQ+-themed literature courses used reading, writing, and talking about diverse literature to move across lines of difference defined in many ways, including but not limited to sexual identities, gender identities and expressions, racial identities, religious experiences, and familial experiences. With respect to lines of difference defined by sexual identities, some students stood firm, but most students moved, and not such in that they gave up one sexual identity for another but in how they experienced and understood their sexual identities, some moving toward more stability in these identities and others moving toward more fluidity. Here we saw evidence of both stances and movement being both ethical and unethical, suggesting that while movement is needed for encounters, including ethical encounters, movement is not in itself more or less ethical than a firm stance is.

In terms of lines of difference defined by gender identities and expressions, students moved in how they understood and experienced these identities not only in themselves but also in relation to one another. Some of the movement was in and around trans and gender-fluid communities, but some of the movement was in and around trans- and gender-fluid-ally communities. That is to say, students actively moved to become better allies to their trans and gender-fluid classmates. In these encounters, movement toward an other was ethical, whereas a stance away from an other was not. While this was the case here, this was not universally true, as evidenced in the chapter that focuses on race.
When students moved across lines of difference defined by race, there was movement in every direction. There was pushing and pulling, of ourselves and one another. There was, as is to be expected, movement away from attack, threat, and dismissal and movement toward safety, acceptance, and love. Such movement was typically but not solely within lines of difference. But there was also movement across lines of difference, like when people of color trusted their white classmates to engage in antiracist work and when white people accepted the challenge to call out and fight against racism. I understood all of this movement as ethical, but there was also unethical movement, when white people pushed people of color out or themselves away from people of color. Moreover, there were firm stances, some of which were ethical, such as when people of color stood firm with their communities, and others of which were not, such as when white people stood firm in their racism.

Crossing lines of difference defined by religious experiences was similar in that students moved away from hate and toward love but quite different in that often to move away from religious institutions that were hateful meant moving away from family who were loving. This resulted in a sort of vibrating movement, away from religion and toward family, back and forth and back and forth, which was quite wearing on young people. Here we saw young people moving between homes, as Ahmed conceptualizes them. When they had to leave one for another, they experienced loss, which I therefore understand as unethical, in contrast to the times when they could stand in both, simultaneously.

Even aside from religion, movement in relation to family experiences was complicated. As with race and religion, students moved away from family members who were ignorant, dismissive, and disrespectful, even if loving. I understand this sort of moving away from as ethical because it was in protection of their dignity. Simultaneously, though, they tried to understand their parents, in particular, thus moving closer to them, especially when their parents conveyed that they cared and were trying to understand them, too. When young people and parents tried to understand one another, there was less of a vibration and more of a give.

When movement across lines of difference allowed for such give, as distinct from forgiveness, it was consequential. It was imperative for ethical encounters. Among those of us in the course, give looked like connection, like evolving complex and nuanced understandings. It looked like intimacy. But it also looked like preparation for doing such work beyond the course, in the school, in students’ families, but also in broader
communities. Such moments of give rely on accepting responsibility for the harms we have done, on building trust in these particular moments, on being trustworthy, and on believing, even for just this moment, in the potential healing to come. This potential healing is a promise not just for those who have suffered but also for those who have caused the suffering, as they too are damaged in the damaging of others. It is my hope that experiencing the feeling of give, even if only in a course, might serve as an invitation to return to it, again and again.

Moving across lines of difference is not magical. It requires pushing and pulling through silence and talk. It requires agility. It requires work. Likewise, giving, as Ahmed (2000) conceptualizes it, is not magical. It requires the work of moving, but it also requires an openness: openness to an other, openness to connection. With openness, though, comes vulnerability: vulnerability to many things, but among them is damage. Between us, all of us, there are long histories and deep presences of damage that cannot be forgotten. Those who have survived the damages must do everything in their power to prevent their continuation. They must do everything in their power to heal. But so, too, must those who have inflicted the damages. They must take responsibility not only for what they have done but also for what they have benefited from. Without doing so, they cannot heal. And I say “they,” but I mean “I” too. As a queer person, I cannot pull myself closer to someone who has inflicted pain on me and those like me, generation after generation, until that someone has learned about the damage I have endured, has learned about their role in inflicting that damage, and has earned my trust by interrupting and interrogating that damage. As a white person, I cannot expect people of color to pull close to me, as someone who has committed racist acts, even as I strive not to, and benefited from a system based on the fallacy of white supremacy, until I have learned about racism and my role in it and earned trust by interrogating and interrupting the fallacy of white supremacy. We, all of us, have to move in order to give. We have to give to have ethical encounters. This does not mean we have to move against our will. It does not mean we have to forgive. It does not mean we have to give in. But we do have to listen and learn and respond and act, ethically.

Encounters are ubiquitous. Classroom encounters are, too. But ethical encounters are not, even though they are desperately needed. Moving and giving across lines of difference, differences of consequence, can teach us to be respectful and kind, even if not comfortable, in ethical encounters, in and beyond classrooms.