

MA Short Course 2019/20

Just being me: Challenging stereotypical assumptions of the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) community in classrooms

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Abstract

Challenging stereotypical assumptions associated with Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) people is important in classrooms. The Further Education (FE) sector's providers aspire to promote fundamental British Values in all curricular. 'Just Being Me' a national strategy to champion LGBT awareness in the workplace is innovative and recognises a national need for a qualification that promotes awareness of diversity, respect, and tolerance. A new qualification piloted with thirty learners in the West Midlands provides the basis for this qualitative research project. Outcomes from the pilot placed expectations on employers to engage LGBT champions in the workplace to further promote acceptance and tolerance. The project provides a preliminary insight of two initiatives into the experiences of learners undertaking a Level 2, LGBT Awareness qualifications and the experiences of teachers. This paper highlights the value of using '*false assumption stories*' in classrooms to challenge pre-existing beliefs. It provides learners with the opportunity to explore and witness the visibility of equality and diversity in the curriculum. An unexpected finding of this research identifies the consequences of vocational practitioners undertaking a 'Train the Trainer' version of LGBT Level 2 Awareness are using it as a tick box exercise for continuing professional development. The paper concludes with emerging findings that suggest outcomes are not always the same as intentions and the assumptions that practitioners are confident to teach LGBT awareness are unsupported. In comparison, the report identifies key benefits for learners including opportunities to develop debate and open discussion in safe and non-judgemental learning spaces.

Key words: LGBT, Equality, Diversity, Assumptions, Adult learning

1. Introduction

This project is derived from a period of research which includes learner facing field notes and case study to explore the impact of challenging negative assumptions of LGBT+ in classrooms. The research is conducted at an independent training provider in the West Midlands, throughout the academic year 2019/20 with learners participating on a pilot qualification, Level 2 Certificate in LGBT Inclusion in the Workplace. The participants are all employed in social care settings. The research investigates how the use of false-assumption stories can develop learner's debating and open discussion skills in safe and non-judgmental learning spaces. A key point to make is that it is equally important to recognise that teachers should not make assumptions about successful pedagogical responses without considering the results of teaching, learning and assessment interventions. This highlights a similar discussion in MacKeracher's book: *Making Sense of Adult Learning* (2004). By understanding how adults learn, including how teachers experience and learn, we can explore in more depth how the human mind works and what we can do to improve pedagogical craft.

Emphasised in this research, which includes analysis of 30 field notes, two case study accounts and learner interviews, is a dilemma which unearths data to suggest over half (56.6%) of learners made assumptions of LGBT people based on their family beliefs and social perceptions and that a less significant number (30%) had the confidence to challenge negative assumptions being made about older adults at their workplace. A small yet significant number of learners (6.6%) did not understand what a negative assumption was.

The primary idea of making small incremental changes to pedagogy were influenced mid-project by the introduction of a board game which was enjoyed by learners. Another equally important point to make is that social care workers need to widen their experience and knowledge of sexual orientation and gender identity, in order to improve their confidence to challenge discrimination and prejudice inside the classroom and within adult social care settings.

2. Methodology

New qualification

The new qualification for LGBT Inclusion in the Workplace level 2 was the pedagogical vehicle in this research. The deep dive into challenging negative assumptions is an approach used with thirty multi-age learners. This learner community overlapped and became rich connections between people to share honest experiences and opinions in the classroom.

I involved them in learner interviews based on their personal beliefs on two separate occasions in January 2020 and February 2020, which enabled me to revisit what their original beliefs were and if there had been any shift in opinion. Two learners voluntarily opted to become the subjects of case studies; this provided an in-depth lens to their personal experience of the LGBT course and any resulting impact in their critical thinking skills. Case study notes taken at these opportune moments provided me with an improved insight for the research. Revisiting the notes collated at the beginning and comparing them to the final comments made by learners provided invaluable contributions to this project.

In the development of the curriculum and pedagogical resources I worked collaboratively with professionals who identify as LGBT. They provided me with a range of common misconceptions and stereotypes associated with them. By doing this I was able to develop a range of false assumption stories to challenge learners predetermined assumptions in the

classroom. Indeed, LGBT awareness can be a taboo topic of conversation in some family homes and cultures. I needed to create an atmosphere in the classroom, which was relaxed, free of judgment, trusting and most of all confidential. This enabled the learners to feel part of a joint enterprise in their discovery of LGBT awareness. As a mental image I wanted to create some opportunities for learning to represent a 'tug-of-war' with lots of different opinions being challenged back and forth during group discussions.

What had not been accounted for at the beginning of the pilot were two dilemmas. The first being that over half of the research population (56%) already had deep rooted negative assumptions of LGBT people and communities. The second being, a small yet significant number of learners (6.6%) did not know what a negative assumption was. Using Schön's reflection in action I took a step back, to teach what assumption meant and the difference between positive and negative assumptions before moving onto the next stage.

The intention to use the receive, apply, reuse (RAR) pedagogical structure was focussed on the content and depth of the assumptions which became more complex. Once learners received the story activities, they were expected to apply some critical thinking and flip the assumption to reuse in the classroom. Many of the pedagogical responses were challenging and provided a dichotomy of opinion, value, and beliefs. These opportunities created wider participation and a discourse between all participants.

Finally, I was provided with a prototype LGBT board game. One of my colleagues was the creator and needed an arena for the game to be used to explore its effectiveness. The game became one of the most important features of the pilot. Not only did it teach some of the usual hidden curriculum of adhering to rules, turn taking and oracy it became the ignition to critical thinking whilst having fun. This highlights similarities to Hadfield's ideas by describing games as "an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun". In contrast to this, Coffield argues that believing all learning should be fun is a fallacy.

3. Literature Review

Making links between theory and practice

Pedagogy, learning, and support are integral to each other and for learners, impact on the success of the pedagogical responses. In this research, I have used the language of Mezirow and Honneth by recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA) methodology to focus on and study the learners' reflection of their transformation. It was necessary to translate this into teaching and learning strategies linked to Mezirow's emphasis on participation and life history. Mezirow introduced the concept of having three components having the most impact on transformative learning. The three main themes are the experience of life, critical reflection and rational discourse. It was important to apply skills to promote transformative teaching and learning with this learner group. Understandably, I needed to be receptive to their different points of views. The most impactful transformative learning was experienced by sharing stories and getting to know the learners. The learning environment was proving to be impactful for learners by having care at its core. As suggested by Duckworth and Smith (2018), it was necessary to focus on establishing and sustaining the caring, enriching, and dialogic relationships with learners that were founded on knowing them. By understanding their backgrounds and what they wanted to achieve, a social contract was formed, and through that my belief in them as learners was communicated. By investing time in them at the beginning of the qualification pilot motivation and self-belief was encouraged. In using these approaches there was a positive response to the cultural dimensions that learners bring into classrooms.

Also, whilst relating to theories it was necessary to recognise that not all learners fall into one category. Douglas McGregor's X and Y Theory (1985) can be applied to classroom settings. The theory is based on a set of assumptions which are inverse. It suggests that theory X learners do not want to learn and prefer being told what to do, whereas theory Y learners are stimulated and interested in their learning. What mattered when applying this theory was to appreciate that learners can switch between both X and Y traits. These challenges were overcome by the empowerment of the social contract written by the research population.

Fisher argues that 'thinking' can be taught and in later life is likely to lead to powerful capabilities and innovative thinking. In this study, thinking was focused on how LGBT people are perceived by society. To establish how learners can become philosophers who cultivate new beliefs, values and opinions and how thinking should be the cornerstone of pedagogy. Encouraging learners to share their thoughts allowed me to get to know the learners better and benefit their experience in the classroom. This highlights a similar discussion in Dewey's book *Experience and Education* (1963), in which he suggests that an education system that restricts learners' freedom of thought and movement will inhibit their intellectual and moral development. In this study this was a cyclical process of; thinking; reflection; thinking about what might happen if things were done differently; exploring new ways of thinking and revising deep rooted opinions.

Thinking became widespread because of playing a game. According to Crookall (1990) learners engage in games actively, therefore they are called learner-centred activities. Through games learner and teacher roles are flipped and learners were encouraged to actively participate in their learning. By using games, different levels of thinking were created which allowed learning to take place unconsciously. As a result, when the learners focus was on the game, they acquired a discourse which they were unaware of. The natural dialogue was intense, sensitive and highly emotional in parts. Learner motivation is another important issue that should be considered because when playing a game, it can increase significantly. Avedon (1971) claims that "games spur motivation and students get very absorbed in the competitive aspects of games; moreover, they try harder at games than in other courses". The game provided a safe space for learners to discuss personal experiences, some of which had been suppressed because of family values and expectations, cultural beliefs, and deep-rooted opinions.

Besides the advantages experienced by playing a game, this project highlighted some disadvantages. Stojkovic and Jerotijevic (2011) mention a common disadvantage being straying away from the basic purpose of game-play activity, due to inadequate rule restriction. The negative assumptions being challenged in pedagogical exchanges were intended to address prejudice clustered around sexual orientation, homophobia, and transphobia. Whilst the game was carefully constructed to explore what the terms were, it could not prevent a learner from making homophobic slurs in the classroom. Recognising that this was possible in the classroom invited me to challenge learners to agree a social contract regarding what was acceptable and unacceptable within the setting. Rules changed after frequent games were played, the learners became the rule restrictors which gave evidence of their extended 'thinking' skills. They had a deeper awareness of misconceptions and the impact experienced by LGBT people when negative assumptions were made about them.

Using Brookfield's lenses in this study had advantages and disadvantages. Using the theoretical lens to make sense of pedagogy and challenge my practice enables me to make consistent improvements to lessons and pedagogical responses. Of equal importance, critical reflection and peer review play their part in practitioner research. Classifying learners who contributed to case studies as peers and using Brookfield's colleagues lens helped to triangulate qualitative data and an analysis of pedagogical impact. Active research is

important as it exposes what has worked in the classroom and what has not. It provides an opportunity to systematically question my own teaching as a basis for development and to test theory in practice. This can be likened to Dewey's notion of experiential learning and how each past or present experience should be viewed from the perspective of how it can shape future actions.

4. Results

Experiences of learners

The experiences of learners which emerged as important from this research serve as lenses for examining the development of their critical thinking, debating and open-discussion skills. Consideration had to be made to two different types of learning in the classroom. Firstly, there was learning by acquisition by understanding the facts to gain a qualification. The second strand was learning from taking part, interacting with the group, and playing the game. Both models were essential for learners to understand what the learning experience could do for them as suggested by Sfrad (1998).

Key findings proved that learners had the desire to listen and learn despite their difference in opinion and socio-economic backgrounds. Inside the classroom they shared an agreement that what ever was disclosed during this time was listened to, debated and impartial. It became okay for them to tackle their own views and opinions in new and interesting ways. Learning to work with each other helped them to overcome the sensitivities exposed when they did not quite understand what was expected of them. This classroom culture gave a sense of community and camaraderie where learners developed each other's knowledge during active learning activities. Challenging assumptions, having debates and dialogue was so much more than a pedagogical response, it improved their way of thinking which would never have happened if they had not come together as a group.

Learning to work with each other required them to develop their social, emotional, and intellectual skills. There were several defining moments for learners which occurred only after their bond was secured in the classroom. Some learners felt safe to disclose deep-rooted social issues experienced by family members who could not 'come-out' as LGBT. These words were spoken out loud for the first time in the safety of each other. There was a great deal of emotion in the classroom, care had to be taken not to blur the lines between pedagogy and a self-help group. In allowing learners to express emotion, they stretched their thinking skills even further. Shared experiences enriched the sessions week on week, within a short space of time, they did not behave as spectators in the room. They were brought together by the game and all became committed players. This experience did not change the values and beliefs of all learners, it would be impossible to do so in such a short amount of time. Some of these inherent deep-rooted values may never change no matter how much of a deep or surface learning is experienced.

Experiences of teachers

The notion that all learners will attend the class, learn about LGBT and become better human beings is absurd. This qualification deals with values and behaviours which are contested in society. Learner behaviour can change with little warning, maybe it was something you said or did in the classroom? Being confronted with a range of behaviours requires a stoic approach. Afterall, I was there to excite their debate, discourse, and collaboration. In some ways, the 'conductor of an orchestra' not the teacher at the front of the class. The ability to manage classroom behaviour and having the skills to allow for opposing values and beliefs is something that needs to be carefully planned for.

Empowering the learners to devise a class agreement on their expected behaviours at the beginning of their learning provided them with an informal contract, which worked well.

Being impartial in the classroom is a norm in the pedagogical world. There is a requirement for teachers to have well-planned pedagogical responses which open debate and allow for democracy in the classroom. It lends itself to the development of higher order critical thinking skills and how to change negative attitudes. Understanding the emotional intelligence of learners is also key as sometimes outcomes are not the same as intentions or assumptions.

Key Themes

There is little doubt that teachers should avoid assuming all learners will respect the values and beliefs of others. The research unfolded a growing concern, assumptions should not be made about teachers undertaking a two-day 'train-the-trainer' version of the course to have the skill, knowledge, compassion, or empathy to teach LGBT awareness.

It is okay to go back before going forwards, teaching, and learning cycles follow these principles in ever evolving turns of the wheel.

5. Recommendations

Teachers need critical friends

If practitioners are teaching societal values and beliefs, there must be consideration made to the emotional experience and intelligence of learners. Having well-prepared pedagogical responses equip practitioners for the inevitable emotions that can be displayed in classrooms. Having a critical friend requires knowing a person and trusting their abilities to provide honest support and feedback in discussions intent on improving practice and by encouraging resilience in the curriculum.

There is little doubt that games excite participation and understanding. They provide peer positivity in the classroom by creating attitudes which engages learning. Learners experienced less stress and did not have to find the words to complete paper activities. Dialogic process and oracy became great tools to develop learners critical thinking skills as they shared personal life experiences, ingrained family values, and beliefs.

Learners need to make better use of independent learning to explore variances in social justice within LGBT communities. The intentions of the new qualification should be focussed on creating independent enquirers who want to deepen their knowledge and use this to be more aware of the needs of people in LGBT communities to be treated equally.

6. Conclusions

Not all was as it seems!

This research set out to explore how challenging negative assumptions of LGBT in classrooms has a positive impact by raising awareness and challenging pre-existing beliefs. It is not difficult to see that teachers can and do make assumptions of learners when they first meet them. It was never intended to analyse the impact of a board game, or the physical emotions of learners, these were symptoms of the research which came to the surface naturally, yet the research would not have stood up without them.

The enriching pedagogical responses exposed by playing the LGBT game were successful. It provided learners with a platform to participate in an enjoyable learning experience. They experienced high levels of engagement and motivation with some learners using their critical thinking skills during sessions. There was no silver bullet solution, it would be ostentatious to suggest that all learners on the pilot changed their thinking – they did not. Accepting the evidence that deep-rooted beliefs and values may never change is also a valuable lesson to learn. Negative assumption stories did play a part in the research, the LGBT game however, became a more intriguing area on which to link theory to practice.

The research has been advantageous because it has provided a medium by which to measure my performance as a practitioner. Using theoretical lenses help to make sense of practitioner and learner assumptions and offers a worthwhile critical view of shared experiences. Case studies and learner interviews were honest, critical, and worthwhile, without learner engagement the evidence would not stand up. Adopting the principles of Fielding where teachers and learners are valued, there are more possibilities for everyone to become better human beings.

In addition, feedback collected through these accounts of experience offers a valuable means for practitioners to develop their practice and continue to improve. Further thematic analysis and research is needed to establish a wider understanding of the impact for learners. What matters most is, the research has been undertaken and has the potential to shift horizons in my future pedagogical response and curriculum planning. Research is important as it challenges the practitioner to be a better teacher, understand how theory links to practice and how to improve the learners pedagogical experience. One way of judging the impact and quality of the learner's experience is to ask learners what they think. The pilot of a new qualification was an ideal platform to consult with them about their learning experience. This not only contributed to the qualitative data but also encouraged even more opportunities for thinking and reflection. Learners voice matters, it has the potential to improve teaching and learning from looking at the qualification content through the learner lens and in doing so they become partners within the research.

[Word Count: 3501]

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