

Beyond Boundaries

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Common Causes: how students, staff and alumni uniting around shared goals, can build community and open avenues for research and enhance student experience

Abstract

This paper will explore how common causes and shared goals can enable staff, students and alumni to work together in creative ways, working beyond the boundaries of these categories. The paper will take as a case study the work undertaken by Dr Daniel Somerville in relation to Worcestershire Pride.

Worcestershire Pride is a volunteer run community group that seeks to provide cultural and community building events for LGBT+ people in Worcestershire. Activities are planned throughout the year and will culminate in a one day celebration on 23rd September 2017, accompanied by a small arts festival in Worcester. The organising committee is comprised of local activists, business owners and staff, students and alumni of the university.

This cooperation around a common cause and shared goal means that staff and current and former students are able to communicate within a structure other than that provided by the university. Further links to LGBT+ students through the SU and LGBT+ society, and LGBT+ staff, are being cultivated which means that the university can further demonstrate its commitment to diversity and inclusivity.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in the UK, and 2019 is the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, regarded as the beginning of the global LGBT+ movement, which Pride celebrates. These milestones in the LGBT+ movement provide topical subjects for researchers. With its connections to local LGBT+ stakeholders and national networks (UKPON) Worcestershire Pride, in which the university is becoming increasingly invested, provides an avenue for networking and data gathering for potential research projects.

Common Causes: how students, staff and alumni uniting around shared goals, can build community and open avenues for research and enhance student experience

In this paper, I will explore how common causes and shared goals might enable staff, students and alumni to work together in creative ways, working beyond the boundaries of these categories. The paper proposes that staff and students might, in engaging in activism and activities around common causes, bridge perceived gaps between staff and students and offer ways to view each other beyond the roles that those terms imply. Goodenough, Hart and Stafford (2015) propose that, “An artificial, and generally unhelpful, divide between lecturers and students frequently occurs in higher education, especially among recent school-leavers. Bridging that divide allows lecturers and students to develop collaboratively to the benefit of both parties.” While their study relates to Residential Field Courses, the opportunities for students to encounter their lecturers as fellow humans in, for example, committees with a goal to plan an event or protest, are similar, offering an opportunity to foster “a more mature relationship between lecturers and students. ... important for pastoral care, enabling lecturers to engage with issues that may be preventing students from reaching their full potential, as well as furthering academic development” (Goodenough, Hart and Stafford, 2015). Alumni involved in these activities, may similarly act as role models, and may also benefit from further encounters with lecturers beyond their formal studies, when many may feel adrift without the structures of university life.

The paper will take as a case study the work I have undertaken in relation to Worcestershire Pride, a volunteer run community group that seeks to provide cultural and community building events for LGBT+ people in Worcestershire. While this community may have very different needs and histories to other groups that might coalesce around issues facing them, or events for their communities, I propose that

others may see in this work a model for organising beyond the structures offered by the university. Groups celebrating BAME identities, or protesting racism and xenophobia may find a model in this work; groups for people with disabilities, activities around women's issues, or green issues, mental health awareness, animal rights or charitable religious events such as those undertaken during Ramadan or at Christmas, may also offer opportunities for staff and students to work together for a common cause.

I cannot, within the scope of this paper, account for all the variables of so many groups but will speak to my own experience of working with students and alumni with an aim to plan and execute a Pride event for LGBT+ people. Activities are planned throughout the year and will culminate in a one day celebration on 23rd September 2017, (the weekend after Welcome Week) accompanied by a small arts festival in Worcester. The organising committee is comprised of local activists, business owners and staff, students and alumni of the university. For students, seeing a lecturer struggling with the peculiar bureaucracy of a community committee, while also sharing responsibility for decision making and execution of a project, has a way of bringing people together and equalising them. Seeing that a lecturer or student has a passion beyond the subject that they teach, or learn, engenders respect and opens doors to helpful communication. Again, I refer to Goodenough, Hart and Stafford (2015) who identify that students exposed to lecturers in this way think of their lecturers as 'knowledgeable friends, there to help' which is a useful distinction to them being there to 'dictate' or 'teach'.

Working with students outside of the structures of the university does, of course, raise some interesting questions. Why, we may ask would it be important for LGBT+ students in particular to have these opportunities to see their lecturers in a new light?

What do LGBT+ groups actually do? Isn't there a danger of over familiarity, or even sexual indiscretion? And finally, does activity like this in some way privilege LGBT+ students involved in, or aware of, these activities?

In regard to the latter question, if you may wonder whether this approach advantages or privileges LGBT+ students, offering them extra, or 'over and above' educational opportunities, I would firstly refer you to what playwright Harvey Fierstein had to say on the universality of his work and subjects:

All the reading I was given in school was always heterosexual, every movie I saw was heterosexual, and I had to do this translation. I had to translate it to my life rather than seeing my life. Which is why when people say to me, "Your work is not really gay, it's universal." And I say "Up yours. It's gay. And that you can take it, and translate it to your own life is very nice, but, at last, I don't have to do the translating. You do"

Harvey Fierstein in *The Celluloid Closet* (1995)

While this quote speaks to the need for other groups to translate the work I am describing to their own circumstances, I would also invite you to consider that LGBT+ students are always in a process of 'translating' the heteronormative world, in which it is often very hard to locate themselves – their sense of self and of identity. LGBT+ students are continually, if unintentionally, disadvantaged each time they are given a heteronormative play to read, film to watch, history to research; or any time we use a gendered pronoun to describe a trans person or non-binary person; any time a heterosexual colleague mentions in passing their marriage or opposite sex partner, their children or any heteronormative, seemingly inconsequential topic. LGBT+ students are continually required to 'do the translation' as Fierstein would have it. So, I see it as vital to offer these students an alternative example of a lecturer where no such translation is necessary, and as a consequence, to challenge heterosexual students to do some translating of their own and/or to simply encounter an out gay

lecturer as an aspect of their education, or perhaps this is better expressed as, their wider introduction to the world of diversity and difference. Therefore, being openly gay, and furthermore being an actively visible member of the LGBT+ community through Pride, is very important to my personal pedagogic philosophy that goes beyond the curriculum and addresses in very personal and individual terms some of the strategic aims of the university. Given the UK Professional Standards Framework V1 & V2 that refer to diverse communities and equality of opportunity, this approach addresses the aims higher education more broadly, which includes therefore the need to promote diversity and inclusivity. I also feel that it is important and implicit in the overall experience of higher education to expose students to different positions and perspectives, both academic and experiential, preparing them for the world at large. I am here adopting Regan's (2011) framework of "role obligations in Higher Education" which offers an alternative to the consumerist model of education and through which lecturers have a moral obligation to provide education, which I interpret more broadly as a moral obligation to identify where certain students might require a personal investment and show of solidarity, where this aligns with my other moral obligation to engage in activism around the LGBT+ community. In answer to the question of whether students who volunteer to work with me on Pride, or those LGBT+ students who see me working in this area of activism are somehow advantaged, I would rather see it as a redressing of their disadvantaged position in a heteronormative world and the normative, though liberal, structures of the university.

Murray (2015) explores the gay professor-student relationships from the 1960s to the 1990s in the USA. The changing nature of this relationship begins as a pre-Gay

Liberation one where both students and professors regarded each other through a generational lens of difference that marked each by their place in history.

Shaped by a gay liberation perspective during the late 1960s and early 1970s, students especially felt that their gay professors embodied, as a generation, a secrecy about sexuality that many liberationists considered repressed, de-sensualized, and sad, on the one hand, and curious, engaging, and even exciting on the other. ... Gay professors, in turn, “sampled” modern attitudes toward homosexuality and shifting emotional styles through their gay students. ... The individuals became representatives and archetypes from one generation to another rather than people with their own internal worlds; students and teachers approached each other as historians and sociologists of sorts.

Murray (2015)

In the post-Gay Liberation 1990s, where social and religious conservatism had taken root in the USA Murray asserts that older professors act more as individual (sometimes reluctant) role models for emerging gay students.

One gay academic interviewed by Toni McNaron in the 1990s noted that “My companion and I have to act as role models for the gay and lesbian students, and frankly, it is exhausting. I love these kids, but sometimes I just want to be left alone. There are many times I wish I were back in the closet—not for lack of pride, but because of overexposure” ... Other professors recognized the importance of serving as role models since many students believe they simply never have known a gay person. This imperative to help gay youth might have been heightened in the 1980s and 1990s when reported violence against gays had increased, particularly among gay youth, as did gay suicide

Murray (2015)

In contemporary Britain, the relationship may be characterised as a combination of these ideas. In my experience students are fascinated to learn that I lived through the 1980s period of gay activism and the Pride movement represented in the 2014 film *Pride*, which highlights the activities of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, for example. As such they may view me through a generational lens with some curiosity, but this also enables me to speak with some authenticity about the

homophobia of the 1980s as well as the associated creative backlash to Thatcherism, which I witnessed first-hand. There is also a reversal occurring whereby my history (as older person, lecturer) is one akin to the liberationist paradigm, while I frequently encounter complacency and conservatism among younger people, in particular students, whose activism is limited to online petitions. I may also play the part of perceived role model offering a positive image of an out gay man in a city where it is still quite common to encounter casual homophobia and transphobia, as well as some more serious incidents of prejudice and discrimination. In March 2017 the Worcester News published a story concerning a lesbian couple being denied the use of a taxi service, for example. In a 2016 report compiled by Fortis Living and University of Worcester LGBT staff networks, West Mercia Police figures show 250% increase in hate crimes offences motivated by sexual orientation and a 100% increase in those motivated by transgender identity since the EU referendum. These figures are higher than the nationwide figure of 147% increase in hate crimes related to sexual orientation nationwide, showing that Worcestershire faces challenges in the area of equality and diversity and the acceptance of difference. Casual homophobia and the increased risk of hate crime place enormous external stresses on LGBT+ students and so I return to the notion that boundary breaking work such as that of Worcestershire Pride is important in opening avenues for students to access pastoral care, on the one side, and to directly take control of activities aimed at stemming homophobia and providing safe spaces, on the other. This speaks to the former questions regarding the activities of LGBT+ groups and the importance of lecturer student boundary blurring within that work. LGBT+ groups and events are not merely places to meet and form affectional and sexual relationships, but to offer real support and solidarity. Consequently I have found that

the perceived dangers of inappropriate or unethical sexual relationships are eclipsed by the more urgent need to provide collaboratively for the community – students, alumni and staff, in this case, also feel a sense of responsibility towards representing and promoting the values of the university collectively, and so it seems no more likely to result in over familiarity of an inappropriate kind while still opening avenues for pastoral care and mutual understanding of issues across generations.

What further advantages might present themselves through the work of lecturers in community organisations that also mobilise students around common causes? I propose that this work also lays the foundation for potential research projects. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in the UK, and 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, regarded as the beginning of the global LGBT+ movement, which Pride celebrates. These milestones in the LGBT+ movement provide topical subjects for researchers. With its connections to local LGBT+ stakeholders and national networks (UKPON) Worcestershire Pride, in which the university is becoming increasingly invested, provides an avenue for networking and data gathering for potential research projects. We are inside the community already, visibly participating in its activities and therefore potential researchers have access as community stakeholders rather than outsiders.

Activities of this kind, as I have already highlighted also have the potential to enhance student experience both for LGBT+ students participating in the organisation of events and for other students attending those events and seeing the university positively supporting issues of diversity and inclusion.

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