

## TEACHING & RESEARCH IN LGBTQ STUDIES

### Teaching Lesbian Studies

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**Editorial Note:** This essay on teaching lesbian studies is the first submission in a new feature in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, aimed at providing guidance to students and faculty who wish to teach courses in LGBT studies or to learn about basic concepts in the field such as minority stress, coming out models, heterosexism, etc. Esther D. Rothblum starts us out on this mission with her experiences teaching a course in lesbian studies. We encourage commentary on this piece and submissions about other experiences in teaching or introductions to basic concepts in sexuality and gender studies.

*This article describes teaching an upper-level undergraduate course on lesbian studies. It focuses on the types of students likely to enroll in this course, key aspects of gender identity and sexual orientation to be included, national and international issues to be discussed, and potential readings.*

**KEYWORDS** *lesbian pedagogy, teaching about lesbians, lesbian scholarship*

In 2005, I was hired to teach lesbian studies in the Women's Studies Department of San Diego State University, the oldest women's studies department in the United States and, indeed, the world. In addition, I am director of the LGBT Studies major and minor. Although I teach lesbian, gay,

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bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies at the introductory undergraduate and the advanced graduate level, my focus in this essay is on teaching the course *Lesbian Lives and Cultures* at the advanced undergraduate level.

Teaching any aspect of sexuality studies is challenging because of the mix of students likely to sign up for such a course. Some will identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), but may or may not know much about scholarship on sexuality. Some students will be heterosexual but, due to majors in women's studies or cultural studies, may have advanced background of this topic. Students may have a parent, child, uncle, neighbor, roommate or friend who is LGBTQ, but, in that case, the gender, age, and specific circumstances of the contact person may have provided students with a limited idea of LGBTQ issues (e.g., youth groups or issues facing gay elders). Increasingly, students (mostly women, but a few men) take such a course for no other reason than that it fits into their schedule.

When this course was first developed and taught by Bonnie Zimmerman, it briefly had the title *Women-Identified Women* in order to appear less controversial on students' academic transcripts. Now, I sometimes feel that that would be a more appropriate title given the range of self-identities among my students and the scholarship on the fluidity of women's sexuality (e.g., Diamond, 2009). If the general public defines lesbians as women who have sex with women, we need to discuss who is a woman, including intersex and transgender identities. My students tend to identify as queer in terms of their sexual orientation, and to some extent also in terms of their gender. Students often expressed a wish that there were courses on bisexual women or transgender issues. A course that foregrounds the lesbian experience needs to focus on unique aspects of lesbians as compared to heterosexual, bisexual, and queer women, intersex and transgender individuals, as well as gay and bisexual men.

On the one hand, it is vital to discuss the diversity of language for identities and genders across historical time and geographic regions. I highly recommend the book *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures* (Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999). This book has chapters about gender and sexuality in Native American cultures, women's same-sex relationship in Suriname, women's desire in ancient and modern India, African versus Western constructions of sexuality in Lesotho and Zimbabwe, female cross-dressing in Malaysia, and many others. These readings point out the importance of historical and social context in understanding lesbian identities.

On the other hand, I like to include a book of readings about contemporary and recent U.S. lesbian lives in order to provide a context for young women living in the United States today. Students very much like the book *A Woman Like That: Lesbian and Bisexual Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories* (Larkin, 1999), which contains essays by Elizabeth Lorde-Rollins

(daughter of Audre Lorde), lesbian activists such as Jill Johnston and Karla Jay, writers such as Leslea Newman and Minnie Bruce Pratt, Holocaust survivor Eva Kolisch, and transman Pat Califia, among many others. Finally, for many women in the 1970s, lesbian identity was a core part of second-wave feminism, and it is important to focus on the connection between lesbianism and feminism. Current students often know little about feminism, nor, despite identifying as queer, about queer theory. In sum, I spend several weeks on defining terms on gender and sexual identity, on lesbian history, and on the multiple ways that societies across national boundaries have constructed the lesbian.

It is important that the instructor is knowledgeable about research on the biology of sexuality. Back in the 1970s, lesbians viewed sexual identity as a political choice. (Remember the slogan “Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice”?) Now it is progressives who see sexual orientation as biologically determined and conservatives who are “pro-choice” on this issue. In fact, it is very difficult to conduct high-quality research to answer this question about the biological versus social construction origins of sexual identities (see Hegarty & Pratto, 2001, for a discussion).

Students will want to know all about sex and relationships—we could spend weeks on this topic. I use one of my own articles (Rothblum, 1999) to emphasize the focus that Western cultures place on sexual relationships over friendships. A number of students identify as polyamorous, whereas others haven’t heard this term, so I assign a reading from the *Lesbian Polyamory Reader* (Munson & Stelboun, 1999). Of course the instructor needs to be up-to-date on which U.S. states and other countries have same-sex marriage or other legalized relationships for same-sex couples. I emphasize the fact that not all LGBTQs are pro-marriage; a great article discussing this is “Is gay marriage racist?” (Bailey, Kandaswamy, & Richardson, 2004). When I discuss lesbian parenting I pass around a number of picture books written for children of lesbian and gay parents (see [http://newscenter.sdsu.edu/lgbtq/childrens\\_books.aspx](http://newscenter.sdsu.edu/lgbtq/childrens_books.aspx) for suggestions), and students love the reading, “Butches with babies” (Epstein, 2002).

There are numerous other topics that can be covered. I like to focus on issues in the coming-out process (including an article by Kamano, 2005, about coming out in Japan), lesbian communities, lesbian mental health issues (making sure to focus on ways lesbians are resilient as well those that place them at risk for mental health problems), and appearance issues, including an article by Lyle, Jones, and Drakes (1999) on being Black, lesbian, and beautiful. I discuss religion as well as spirituality (e.g., Starhawk, 1989), and, given that we’re in an educational setting, lesbians as students and teachers. Students could spend all semester on popular culture, especially now that lesbian characters are the norm in television, movies, comic strips, novels, and Web sites. Lesbian athletes and homophobia in sports are

great topics, and I assign a reading about race and homophobia in women's basketball (King, 2009). Finally, I discuss the economics of lesbianism—that is, how in a capitalist society there are efforts to target every minority “market” (see [www.commercialcloset.org](http://www.commercialcloset.org) for great examples of advertisements and commercials targeted at LGBTQs) and Clark's (1993) article on “commodity lesbianism.”

Overall, my goals in this course are to examine the ways that societies across national boundaries have constructed sexuality and gender identity for women, and how lesbians are shaped by societal institutions such as educational settings, the work setting, and constructions of the couple and the family. We evaluate multiple perspectives about lesbian lives and identities from the perspectives of history, psychology, politics, and cultural studies.

San Diego State University is extremely affirmative with regard to LGBTQ issues (for the second year in a row it received the highest rating as an LGBT-friendly campus by the national Campus Pride Index), so there has been little resistance to any of the topics covered in this course. By the time they enroll in this course, students have had substantial exposure to LGBTQ issues in other women's studies or LGBTQ studies courses, or are familiar with LGBTQ issues via friends and relatives. Students may be surprised to learn that lesbian feminists viewed sexual orientation as a choice, or that some lesbians are politically opposed to marriage, but the course does not draw students who are politically conservative or from fundamentalist religions. Hopefully, as the result of taking this course, students can write and speak articulately about lesbian lives and identities, and demonstrate critical thinking skills as new issues facing lesbians arise in the media and in society.

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