

Educationally Queer: teaching lesbian and gay studies in higher education¹

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When, in 1998, I was appointed the first professor of lesbian and gay studies in the United Kingdom—obviously not the first professor working in the field but the first named as such—I was surprised to find that the media took an interest. Not the gay media, since the academic world hardly ever impinges on their narrowly populist focus on club culture, but the mainstream print and broadcast media. It was not a big story, but it was considered worth mentioning in one or two of the tabloids, most of the broadsheets and even Channel 4 television's *The Big Breakfast* (twice in the one week) as a mildly amusing oddity. What the story tended to raise was a fundamental misunderstanding of how university courses operate—a misunderstanding promoted by a prevailing view of what it means to become gay, to be gay, to be interested in gayness and to go so far as to study gayness. The opening gambit of Colin Bell, who interviewed me on BBC Radio Scotland (23 July 1998), was: 'What's to stop universities offering courses in necrophilia and sadomasochism?' What indeed?

In terms of the perceived uses of gay studies, the typical statement of the common response appears in this small item from a local freesheet distributed around the area of Nottingham in which I live (*The Derby Trader*, 2 July 1998, p. 7): 'Nottingham Trent University has appointed Britain's first professor of lesbian and gay studies. After taking a four-year course, what sort of career will students go into, I wonder?' The first misconception is that if you have a professor of lesbian and gay studies you must be offering a whole degree course in lesbian and gay studies. Secondly, if there is such a degree it must be vocational—and yet how could it possibly be? This is the source of most of the humour about my appointment. I shall not speculate on the jobs this question is meant to conjure up.

The same conundrum—where could gay studies possibly lead a student?—arises in the response of rent-a-quote Tory member of parliament Ann Widdecombe, at that time the shadow Home Secretary. In a report in the *Sunday Mirror* (5 July 1998, p. 23), Widdecombe called my appointment 'a phenomenal waste of public money' and added: 'It would be far better spent giving young people academic and vocational training to ensure they get jobs. It is not at all clear to me what kind of job this would qualify someone for'. Widdecombe's two remarks are, not uncharacteristically, contradictory. In the first place, she rather impertinently calls for my salary to be spent on vocational degree courses, and yet she immediately treats lesbian and gay studies as if they were intended to be vocational by speaking of the specific jobs they could not possibly qualify a student to do.

It would not be stretching things too far, I think, to suggest that the underlying question here is one of the very employability of lesbian and gay people. Look at two tiny items in the *Sun* and the *Daily Sport*, both reporting my appointment accurately but both commenting on it with the copy editor's choice of headline: in the *Sun* (30 June 1998, p. 16) it looks as if a whole campus might be infected with camp if an individual like myself—'SO CAMPUS'—were to be appointed to a chair; in the *Daily Sport*, the very work my students do, even when done to the highest possible standard, cannot be anything but mere sodomy, the contemptibly laughable physical expression of themselves: 'First cl-arse degree ...' (30 June 1998, p. 7). Within the limits of the *Daily Sport's* imagination, no lesbian students threaten to undermine this pornographic pun. To the press, the existence of gay studies means only one thing: sodomy. The further suggestion, however subliminal, is that the teacher of such a subject will seek to sodomise his students. No wonder a press release from the right-wing British National Party called my appointment 'another indication of the decay at the very fabric [*sic*] of our once great society'.

In a 1974 essay on the teaching of gay literature, Arnie Kantrowitz writes: 'we teachers must begin with who we are and not with who others think we are supposed to be, in order to reach our real students and have some chance of educating them, of fostering the understanding of facts and concepts rather than the memorization of them, of preparing our students for their lives and not only for the roles defined by their employers' (Kantrowitz, 1974, p. 329). How quaint and idealistic this sounds in these days of 'transferable skills'. It appears to call for something as unprofessional as what I have, on occasion, been accused of: 'bringing your personal life to work'. Yet, for all its quaintness Kantrowitz voices an ideal to which I am still willing to subscribe.

For any significant volume of research into attitudes within higher education to lesbians and gay men, we must look to the United States. I am not speaking specifically of gay studies, here, but rather of the more general social and pedagogic atmospherics of the academy. A questionnaire sent to chairpersons of college and university English departments in the mid-1970s found that one in four admitted to a hostility to gay people. Individuals in north-eastern states were generally less hostile than those in the south and west; and those in larger institutions were less hostile than those in small ones (Crew, 1978). As for students, a national survey of college freshmen in the 1980s found that 63% of men and 45% of women agreed that homosexual relationships should be prohibited. Another study of college freshmen in the late 1980s found that 50% thought gay men disgusting and 30% would prefer homosexuals to be excluded from college. In the same period, fully 98% of freshmen surveyed had heard 'disparaging comments' about lesbians and gay men (Nelson & Krieger, 1997). (Remember that attitudes in the 1980s were prejudicially affected by the AIDS epidemic.)

Snapshot studies of sub-groups of students may not always be representative; but, taken together, what they say about the different attitudes of women and men seem convincingly constant. (Some generalisations may be drawn, too, about ethnic background.) A survey of the attitudes of a group of American medical students indicated that 'in general men were more homophobic than women, as were Asian students, those without homosexual or HIV positive friends, and those who had not been HIV tested. Students who had no previous sexual partners and those who had treated no AIDS patients also expressed more homophobia' (Klamen *et al.*, 1999).

Among students at a university in the American south-west, 'Caucasians and Hispanics [were found to be] more knowledgeable about HIV transmission than African-Americans. Also, African-Americans are more homophobic than Caucasians'. But across the racial groups, gender differences were more or less uniform: 'Women are less fearful of interacting with HIV-infected persons than are men' (Waldner *et al.*, 1999, pp. 126–127).

One study found, not surprisingly, that an 'Anti-homosexual attitude was significantly correlated with Attitudes Towards Women Scale scores'. Specifically, 'Holding more liberal and egalitarian attitudes toward the role and rights of women in society was predictive of less anti-gay response'. Conversely, 'Holding stronger religious convictions was related to expressing stronger negative attitudes'. And, as most other research confirms, 'personal acquaintance with a gay man, lesbian, or bisexual person was predictive of fewer negative attitudes'. It was the conviction that this principle never failed to operate to the benefit of gay people that explains the gay liberation movement's unwavering commitment to universal 'coming out'. This study was carried out among male and female students of psychology or business studies. Revealingly, 'a large percentage of the men in the business classes did not participate or chose not to complete the questionnaires' (Cotton-Huston & White, 2000, pp. 123, 128, 127).

However, we should not carelessly assume that, in such matters, anatomy is destiny and women are uniformly liberal in their opinions. Among women students at a university in the American mid-west, those 'who believed that homosexuality was psychologically caused were more homophobic, whereas those that believed in biological causes were less homophobic' (Matchinsky & Iverson, 1996, p. 126). The question of aetiology, then, may be unavoidable on a gay studies course, even if it consumes time better spent on gay culture itself. Unlike questions of gender or ethnicity, homosexuality is routinely subjected to moralistic judgement relating to the perceived causes of its very existence. It has not proved sufficient, to non-homosexuals, merely to accept its existence as given and neutral. Everything else in the study of issues related to homosexuality and (perhaps even more so) to bisexuality stems from and returns to this one point. Among students enrolled for a course called 'Psychology of the Young Adult' at a south-eastern American university, 'Men were ... more likely than women to perceive homosexuality as being a symptom of mental illness' (Nelson & Krieger, 1997, p. 73). Such prejudices extend beyond gay individuals themselves, even sometimes being held against the next generation. One study found that heterosexual respondents among college students 'who thought that homosexuality was learned were less willing to date or marry the child of a lesbian' (Crawford & Solliday, 1996, p. 72).

Attitudes to sexuality are inextricably bound up in other social attitudes and their origins. A resilient association of homosexuality itself with not only the seduction and abuse of minors but—apparently even worse—the influencing of children to become gay themselves affects students' opinions on teaching, child care and parenthood. On being shown four 'case vignettes' of potential parent couples—heterosexual Caucasian, heterosexual African-American, heterosexual interracial (black/white) and gay male African-American—undergraduates at a mid-western university 'consistently held negative attitudes toward the gay couple', which they judged to be 'less emotionally stable' than the heterosexual couples, to have 'poor potential to be parents' and to be incapable of offering 'a loving home' for a child.²

It has to be said that gay studies have only come up with one operational idea with regard to countering the negative opinions of students. It is a good idea, but we ought to question whether it is really sufficient. The principle is elementary but ambitious: 'when lesbian, gay, or bisexual educators come out to their students, they may positively affect their students' attitudes and reduce heterosexist prejudice'. Sure enough, empirical research proves that, 'as a whole, students taught by the self-identifying gay instructor demonstrated a decrease in negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and that students taught by heterosexual instructors did not' (Waldo & Kemp, 1997, pp. 81, 90–91). These conclusions confirm what gay academics suspected in the 1970s. The benefits of having openly gay and lesbian teachers would show fruit in new generations of students with more balanced views on sexuality in general.

However, one should never underestimate the surprise, or shock even, that being taught by an openly gay tutor for the first—and often only—time in a student's life can cause. This is understandable and partially explains why heterosexual students sometimes complain of anti-heterosexual bias on gay studies courses. Men have the same problem when first doing women's studies, although they will at least have had the experience of being taught by women since entering education as young children. As long as openly gay teachers (at all educational levels) are a rarity and gay topics remain effectively banned from the curriculum, homosexuality will remain a matter for the toilet walls. It is to the shame of academic and political institutions throughout the Western world that the entertainment media have more to say about gay people's lives than do educators or politicians. To put it bluntly, it is a sorry situation when sitcoms are burdened with the task of protecting elementary human rights.

The findings of such surveys as I have been outlining have been more or less consistent, yet they need not trouble us unduly. No one was ever under the illusion that attitudes could be changed quickly, and it was obvious from the mid-1980s that AIDS was going to slow the process down in some respects, yet in others to give gay people more sympathetic publicity than we could ever otherwise have hoped for. If it is the purpose of an academic discipline to liberalise social attitudes—and many university lecturers certainly believe this to be the case—what such surveys tell us is that students are ripe for the teaching. The commonplace prejudicial distinctions such questionnaires reveal appear to be less intractable than once they were, and formulated in less extreme ways. The very fact that distinctions are being drawn between theories of nature and nurture, albeit crude ones, suggests a bias that is, at least, thoughtful. Since the essence of Identity as represented by the media in the secular Western democracies is a matter of personal choice, the next step—towards acceptance of people who are thought to have 'chosen' to be gay as well as those unfortunates who merely 'can't help it'—cannot be a particularly difficult one to achieve, even without shaking any fundamental beliefs. Otherwise, it is clear that the struggle for gay rights is extremely close to the project of feminism. Neither has been won, nor should we expect either to be winnable outright. We are looking at an extended cultural process.

The history of my ascent to the UK's first chair in gay and lesbian studies is instructive, but would take too long to narrate here. Although there have been many things to be said about the negative side of my experience in my present institution, all of this has to be understood in the context of my having previously

experienced places which were much worse. Let me just say that I have lost one job and been denied others—several that I know of for certain, others that I merely suspect on good evidence—because of the gayness of my research. Despite more than a decade's continuous service on part-time and short-term contracts, plus a doctorate and extensive publications, I was a junior lecturer still when I was 40; only when the Research Assessment Exercise, the UK's national audit of research in institutions of higher education, came along did I swiftly get promoted, firstly to a readership and then to a chair. Even so, the only thing any senior colleague has ever said to me about my *History of Gay Literature* (Woods, 1998), some months before I was promoted to the chair, was that the reviews it received in the mainstream press in this country and the USA were worth £750,000 in free advertising for the university. (This says as much about the general economic and cultural crisis in British universities as it does about a refusal to engage with gayness.)

That even the most liberal senior academics often do not understand what it is to be a prominent figure in one of the new disciplines which have been developed in the last 30 years first became clearest to me in an informal appraisal session five or six years ago. I remember one point with especial clarity. To be told that 'you bring your personal life to work too much' is to have the professional value of your work in gay studies, whether in teaching or research, negated. This accusation came from someone who knew nothing about where I lived, whom if anyone I lived with, whether I had family ties, whether I was in good health, whether I followed any religion; whatever. For this to happen at a time when a whole string of heterosexual colleagues were taking maternity or paternity leave and posting photographs of the consequences on notice-boards around the faculty was especially instructive. To be told, as I was on the same occasion, 'There are loads of lesbians around here but they don't make an issue of it' is, firstly, somewhat to overstate the presence of three lesbian women; secondly, to understate the involvement of all three women in such professional issues as the monitoring and enforcing of equal opportunities; and thirdly, again, to negate my academic involvement in gay studies on the assumption that being one of the country's leading authorities on gay literature is, merely, the public expression of a personal perversion. This is no better than the tabloid assumption that a gay university lecturer has nothing on his mind but sodomy.

Most gay academics, whether in Europe or America, whether as teachers or researchers, work in isolation. It may be that their main professional contact with other gay people is with not colleagues but students. This is certainly true as regards my own professional contact with other gay men (although, as I have said, I do have several lesbian colleagues). The implications of such isolation for gay studies as a discipline are far-reaching. For most of us, and for most of our students, in most institutions, gay studies will never exist as a free-standing programme (or course or degree) but only as discrete indiscreet modules contributing to degrees in a range of umbrella disciplines. In any case, as things stand in the UK, no undergraduate programme could even begin to recruit, since that would be seen by schools and the media—as, indeed, by university faculties—as a quasi-paedophile recruitment of children into homosexuality itself. (As the MA in 'Sexual Dissidence and Cultural Change', at the University of Sussex, has shown, postgraduate recruitment is a different matter.)

The relationship between gay studies and the disciplines in which undergraduate

students do choose to take their degrees is, therefore, one of the most crucial issues in the development of gay studies. Among the most important elements of my teaching are individual lectures I feed into foundation courses on various degree programmes. Not only do these force a captive audience at least passively to address gay issues once or twice in a module programme, but from the point of view of my own interest and satisfaction such lectures tend to attract informal feedback—a word in the corridor, a note under my door, a phrase or two in the feedback form at the end of the semester—demonstrating that there are students who are benefiting from what I do. They may not feel able to say so in front of their peers, but they often want to express gratitude for a reasoned gay presence on their degree course.

As originally conceived in the 1970s, the ideal gay studies tableau was always imagined to involve an openly gay/lesbian teacher working with openly gay/lesbian students on explicitly gay/lesbian topics. Disregarding individual supervisions, I have never worked in such a situation. The reality is more complicated, less complete. Such studies—such careers—take place within the same context of homophobia, indifference and acceptance that prevails outside the academy. They also occur within a context of mass education, where the needs of supposed minorities are perforce subordinated to the economics of the market. The fact is that the majority of students who attend gay modules are likely not to be identified as gay. Most of the undergraduates in my gay studies courses are women who identify as heterosexual.³ Most of the PhD theses I have examined on gay male writing were written by women.

In a pre-module questionnaire, I ask students who opt to follow a module called ‘Contemporary Lesbian and Gay Cultures’ why they chose it, and what reasons they thought other students might have had for choosing it. Many say up-front that they wish to confront and counter their own prejudices—an extremely impressive reason for pursuing any course of study. Yet, of 41 who replied in one recent cohort, only two gave actually being lesbian or gay as their own reason and only nine recognised the likelihood that other students might be following the module because they were lesbian or gay. As might be expected, all of these students were more or less beginners in the study of homosexuality. Asked what lesbian or gay topics they had ever been taught at school, as many as 36 replied categorically: none. There were only three exceptions: one indicated that she had been taught not to be prejudiced against gays, plus some unspecified information about homosexuality and AIDS; the second said there had been relevant work on stereotyping in media studies classes; and the third said she had chosen some gay materials for inclusion in dissertation work. The logical consequence of this lack of preparation is that gay students start out at an advantage over straight students when doing gay studies—just as a French student may do well in a course on French culture. This much is obvious. But it can lead to a complacency which undermines gay students’ results.

Judging by written feedback, many students find it difficult at first, not only to study gay materials—and the sheer sexual outspokenness of gay male culture is often a shock to those who have not encountered it before—but to be taught it by a tutor who is openly gay—that is to say, who is biased. This perception of the subjectivity of the tutor can work both ways: heterosexual students who get low marks have complained of being discriminated against; on the other hand, it

occasionally seems that gay male students want to amble through a module with the tutor discriminating in their favour. Gay students are often affronted when they get low grades on a gay course; many seem to think that being gay obviates the necessity to work hard at studying being gay—again, as if that were the point of gay studies. Moreover, I increasingly find myself supervising gay boys who don't know of any other way of being gay than by going shopping or clubbing. They tend to regard the idea of stopping doing so, if only for the week of their exams, as a violation of their identity.

As I have said, like media studies, courses in lesbian and gay studies are misunderstood as being vocational. This is a misapprehension shared by students, straight or gay, who avoid gay courses because they do not wish to be thought gay, or those gay students who expect high grades merely because they *are* gay. The rarity of such courses leads to distorted expectations. Gay students often look to a gay course for *the* educational experience of their lives. Many straight students come to these courses with the conviction that the struggle for gay rights has long been won and then get upset that the course appears to be attacking heterosexuals.

Recent student generations—including, 30 years ago, my own—have been led to believe that the gender of one's object-choice is immaterial. Moreover, most heterosexual students today assume that the oppression of gay people has ceased in the West. An essay I marked in August 2001 said, of the present day, that homosexual 'People in the Western world were not oppressed by laws'. (In the UK, 'gross indecency'? Section 28? Anti-sodomy statutes across the United States?) But scratch the surface of such beliefs and it peels away to reveal a standard substance of phobic and prejudicial responses. Alternatively, one meets a liberal brick wall which can be as disabling to discussion as an implacably homophobic stance might be. I recently taught a gay cinema course at MA level in which one of the five students present kept returning discussions to the same base line: in her words, 'We're all the same, so what's all the fuss about?' No amount of reminding that the majority of the filmmakers we were studying were celebrating difference rather than similarity could shift this student from an implacable liberal line which got us nowhere.

The formal status of the professorship apart, there is nothing I do in my teaching and promotion of gay studies that has not been done by other lesbian and gay scholars around the world in the last two or three decades. One slight difference, though, is that gay students around the UK know of my existence. They get in touch with me when things go wrong. This is both gratifying and worrying. I have supervised any number of undergraduate dissertations by remote control—or by e-mail, rather—because the students in question felt they were not getting sympathetic or sufficiently well-informed supervision from the tutors in their own institutions. (Although not conducted face to face, this e-teaching is some of the most intellectually and emotionally satisfying work I have had to do in the course of my career.) I think of the gay student of English literature and creative writing who was told in terms that brooked no counter-argument that the meaning of life was reproduction. On the other hand, university lecturers in the humanities are now regularly saying to students who go to them for supervision of final-year undergraduate dissertations words to the effect of, 'Perhaps you could tell me what all this queer theory stuff is about'. They are aware it is something they ought to know, but the imperative is not yet so strong that they either do anything about teaching

themselves or feel they ought to avoid showing themselves up in front of students as being ignorant. This is, perhaps, the apotheosis of lesbian and gay studies: to be making intellectuals feel ignorant all of a sudden. Long may it last.

I have said elsewhere on more than one occasion that, as a specialist in gay studies, like others of my generation, I was an autodidact (Woods, 1994, 1999). However, I would go further and say that, even *as a gay man*, I had to be self-taught. When sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular are topics banned from the school curriculum (I went to a Roman Catholic boarding school); and when, as a serious topic, homosexuality is banned even from the school playground, you learn physically from your own and (if you are lucky, as I was not) each other's hands, but culturally from your own researches: in my day from books and the occasional film; nowadays, also, from television and video. Since school libraries will not subscribe to them or buy them, the gay press and books in gay studies can only help young people who can afford to buy them for themselves and, more importantly, if they dare to.

The four walls of the closet of my adolescence were lined with bookshelves, lined with second-hand books. Although it may have appeared, from outside, that I was erecting a protective bulwark against hostile intrusion—which was, indeed, one of the purposes of my bookishness—each wall of books was also, to use a cliché, a window on the world; the very world into which the closet would eventually, if I survived it, release me. But it was not just any world I was looking out on. It was a specifically queer one. (Along with 'spastic', 'queer' was the main insult with which, as schoolboys, we policed each other's physical and moral development.)

After we had scanned Catullus's *Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus* in class, an indiscreet aside by the Latin master led me off to a bookshop to discover the man-loving Catullus in Peter Whigham's wonderfully contemporary translations, dedicated to the memory of William Carlos Williams. A similar moment of eavesdropping sensitivity alerted me to Plato's *Symposium*, which I devoured with the complacent appetite of one who assumes the food he likes best is doing him good. Indeed, Plato did serve up, however anachronistically, a strong antidote to the homophobic ribaldry of dormitory and locker room.

I was starting to become expert in identifying, if not really in discriminating between, books about homosexuality. Or those which I took to be so. This was not a simple matter of identification. When I read *Death in Venice* for the first time—a friend at prep school had recommended it to me and I tracked down a copy in a Bournemouth department store (I still remember the precise shelf)—I was not, of course, Gustave von Aschenbach; and I was certainly not Tadzio; yet I clearly recognised a sphere of interest. In Thom Gunn's early poems, which critics tend to regard as having only hidden and heavily coded references (if any) to his homosexuality, an unversed teenage boy found what he thought were pretty clear representations of his own sexual development. I have since based all my readings of non-explicit gay literature on those early secret encounters with Gunn in my school library.

There were other books that came closer to the literal truth of my own situation: such novels of English public school life as Alec Waugh's *The Foxglove Saga* (1917), Simon Raven's *Fielding Gray* (1967) and Michael Campbell's *Lord Dismiss Us* (1968). When, in the sixth form, our English master asked if we knew of any American authors, I was the only boy who could name even one, James Baldwin,

let alone, as I then did, name all of his novels. It was clear from the fixed smile of encouragement on the master's face that he had heard of some of these but had read none. Fortunately for me, he did not ask about them. Although I remembered the book with some clarity, I would not have felt able to tell the class what happens in *Giovanni's Room*, nor why *Another Country* struck me—as it still does—as one of the most extraordinary books I had ever read.

You might ask how I knew where to find this gay literature. I did not. The blurbs on back covers—I only bought paperbacks, mostly secondhand—were all I had to go on; those and the discreet clues of front cover illustrations. Nor was I as depressed by the deaths in these books as gay liberationists would later suggest I should have been. It was enough to encounter representations of queer love and subdued suggestions of queer sex. Subdued they might be, but they were as vivid between the sheets as any explicit porn video would be to a boy now. All of this literature, and more besides, had been read before I first had sex (1973) and before I reached the then age of consent (I was not 21 until the beginning of 1974). It is the emotional force of these readings that I try to convey to a relatively detached audience in my gay literature teaching, as well as in my critical writing. For me, in a sense, the teaching of gay literature is autobiographical. I *must* bring my 'personal life' to work.

My years as an undergraduate (1971–1974) coincided with, but were untouched by, the birth of gay and lesbian studies in higher education. It would take even the most innovative new universities in Britain some years to acknowledge, let alone catch up with, developments in the United States. These happened piecemeal—in a tiny minority of American educational institutions—but were presently subjected to synthesising endeavours. For instance, in November 1973, 325 lesbians and gay men had attended the first meeting of the Gay Academic Union, at John Jay College, New York. Some were able to speak of their own experience of teaching gay topics; others could only aspire to do so; others still, the students at the event, were yearning to be taught such topics.

In November 1974, the American journal *College English* (the official journal of the National Council of Teachers of English) published a special issue, guest edited by Louie Crew and Rictor Norton, called *The Homosexual Imagination—in Literature—in the Classroom—in Criticism*. This important early document of gay liberationism in the academy includes poetry and critical essays; but of even more interest are its accounts of the uneasy birth of gay and lesbian studies in American higher education. The medievalist Dolores Noll describes coming out as lesbian while teaching at Kent State University in 1971, and setting up experimental courses called 'Gay Womanhood' and 'The Politics of Gay Liberation'. The poet Ron Schreiber describes setting up a course called 'Homosexuality in Western Literature' at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in 1972. Arnie Kantrowitz writes about his course 'Homosexuals and Literature' at the Staten Island Community College.

The editors' opening essay, 'The Homophobic Imagination: An Editorial', begins with the premise from which gay literary studies had to be derived: 'Homosexual literature is written, read, criticized, and taught within a generally hostile environment' (Crew & Norton, 1974, p. 272). While the tenor of the whole issue is optimistic, based on the assumption that such hostility can be undermined by systematic strategies, it is clear that many contributors—rightly, as it has

turned out—thought they were in for the long haul. More than mere literary criticism was at stake. In an essay called ‘Toward a Gay Criticism’, Jacob Stockinger, at that time a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, argues that ‘a commitment to gay criticism entails participation in extra-textual and extra-literary matters’. In part, this anticipates the ways in which ‘literary’ studies have broadened since the 1970s. But when Stockinger makes the point again, in even simpler terms—‘Gay critics and teachers are forced to expend their interests beyond the library and the classroom’—we can see that it also embraces such questions as student welfare and our own conditions of employment (Stockinger, 1974, p. 306). Unless we keep an eye on the politics of employment, we may, in fact, find ourselves forced out of the library and the classroom altogether; or be allowed there, if at all, only on a temporary or a part-time basis (as was my own experience throughout the benighted 1980s).

For all that the academy is reputedly liberal, it turns out to be no less homophobic than we already know it is both racist and sexist. In this respect it closely mirrors the society at large. Lecturers, support staff, students—there is no reason why these groups should not share the prejudices of the world outside the lecture theatre door. Even students who opt for gay courses can be anti-gay. It stands to reason, even if reason is also affronted by it. The module I teach on the AIDS epidemic in the Western world, although pre-advertised as a gay studies course, seemed to surprise students with the sheer amount of gay material it necessarily has to cover. Before I restructured the module to make the reasons for its inclusion of so much gay material clearer, written feedback often reflected this sense of surprise, even at the end of the module: ‘Too much emphasis on homosexuality’, as one characteristic response put it; or, as another student complained, ‘Rabid homosexual propaganda’.

I am now used to the curious fact that, even in a self-selecting group of students who have chosen to follow what is explicitly advertised as a gay studies module on the AIDS epidemic, there are those who do not really want to hear about gay men. Although I manage to teach them not to use such terms, they often demonstrate, in various subtle ways, that they would rather be studying the ‘innocent victims’—babies, above all. Even a module called ‘Contemporary Lesbian and Gay Cultures’—no room for misunderstanding there, you would have thought—received feedback in which students make it perfectly clear that what they want to hear are not lesbian and gay voices—least of all from their tutor, who unless heterosexual must rise above personal bias—but the detachment and consequent objectivity of the heterosexual viewpoint. As one student argued, the course materials should not be addressed from a gay angle ‘when a minority of the class are actually gay’.

It transpires that the ideology (if you can call it that) motivating many students is ‘We are all human’. Implicit in this is the liberal notion that there is no qualitative difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality—which in one respect is reassuring. But implicit in this is the coercive notion that, therefore, lesbians and gay men have no claim on difference. ‘We are all human’ is often followed by the clinching and deflating corollary, ‘So what’s all the fuss about?’ It is as though the common response to a course on French culture were marked by constant interventions to the effect that, since we are all human anyway, cultural difference is irrelevant and we should, therefore, acceptingly treat the French and their culture as if they were English.

On the other hand, positive feedback on such modules speaks of a successful assault on many complacencies, not least around students' own sexual habits. Although it is clear that some individuals will never be rational about sexual health—one wrote that the AIDS module was 'Quite stimulating and challenging but not shocking or influential enough to change my behaviour'—far more students are devastated to discover quite how inadequate their own sexual education was, even on such elementary matters as HIV transmission. Heterosexual students in particular feel let down by their ignorance of the basics of safer sex. (Gay men and lesbians are far more familiar with this material from the gay media.) They think back on their school biology teachers' diagrammatic representations of reproductive plumbing with growing anger. Those who are parents often write that my gay studies courses have transformed the way they intend to educate their own kids. Although this constituency is not quite the one that I ever imagined I would end up teaching on these courses, I often feel it has become possible to provide the transformative syllabus envisaged by the contributors to that special issue of *College English* back in 1974.

In one week in 2000, Thom Gunn enthusiastically gave me permission to dedicate my third poetry collection to him, and a gay student at a British university sent me a copy of his undergraduate dissertation on my poetry, for which he had been given a first class grade. (He also sent me some of his own poems.) This symbolic coincidence of homages across three generations struck home to me, in a frankly sentimental moment, as signalling not merely a trivial matter of success in my own career, but the extent to which gay literary studies have themselves developed in the last three decades. Far from languishing on the eccentric fringes of the intellectual life of our students, we are actually managing to teach them, gay and straight alike, life-changing attitudes and practices which may yet become second nature to future generations and which will come to be recognised as essential to the mainstream of our cultures.

NOTES

- [1] Part of this essay was delivered as a keynote address at the inaugural conference of the lesbian and gay section of the British Psychological Society, at the University of Surrey on 18 July 2000. I am grateful to Sue Thomas for her perceptive reading of an earlier draft.
- [2] Not until the last page of this study do its authors think it worth mentioning that these students were from a Roman Catholic university.
- [3] In its fullest year, my module 'Representing AIDS' had 102 students, 17 male and 85 female; of these there was one out gay male and one out lesbian woman. In its fullest year, 'Contemporary Lesbian and Gay Cultures' had 51 students: nine men and 42 women, with no out gay men and two out lesbians.

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