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Innovations at the Grassroots Level: LGBTQ+ History in High School Classroom Instruction

The paucity of teachers integrating LGBTQ+ history into their lessons illustrates how important the motivation to do so is among those who teach this material. Personal motivation, though, is not the only factor in determining whether students learn LGBTQ+ history. School and classroom environments conducive to introducing this material are also essential factors. In fact, strong support systems in environments that foster creativity and discussion were deemed integral to including LGBTQ+ history.¹ The classroom experiences described by the teachers featured in this chapter, then, are the product of their investment in this topic and its necessity as well as the knowledge that there is some level of support and/or an audience for this endeavor.

Teachers' experiences, strategies, and ideas about teaching LGBTQ+ history strongly indicate that for this material, like other topics in US history, there is no one way, or a correct way, to convey this information to students. While all believe in its significance as part of students' historical learning, they have different ideas about how to introduce the material, on which topics and events to focus, the tactics they use in class to disseminate and discuss this history, and the best ways for students to access it (see Figure 9.1).

These differences are determined not only by teachers' personal ideas and philosophies but also by the student population in their classes, the school environment, the political atmosphere in the community, and their own life experience. In many ways, then, teaching LGBTQ+ history is quite similar to any other topic or era in a US history class.

Figure 9.1 Topics taught. The teachers interviewed for this study reported integrating LGBTQ+ history in an array of topics, including both national and local events.

Integrating LGBTQ+ History into the US History Curriculum

Most of the teachers interviewed believe that LGBTQ+ history is a part of the larger history of the United States and teach it as such, integrating it into the curriculum where they believe it belongs. As Melanie Wells asserted, "I try to just weave it in as I go. A lot of what I do is just drop in references about ... 'This is how this connects to that issue.'"² For many, lessons on the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movements of the 1960s were/are natural places to discuss LGBTQ+ history and the roles of LGBTQ+ individuals; all of the teachers, though, incorporated LGBTQ+ history in different ways and eras over the course of the year. As Felicia Perez stated, "I don't think that you can have a queer history if that's the only history you're going to have ... if we can show the relationship between individuals and topics and historical moment, that it is the relationship that is going to allow us to see these things are all intersectional."³ Moving away from heteronormativity and "othering" in social studies classes and making LGBTQ+ history a part of the larger historical narrative are prevailing themes among these teachers' practices.

There are multiple entry points for studying LGBTQ+ history throughout US history. The civil rights era of the 1960s is one of the most popular among the teachers interviewed. This is not the first time that many of the teachers incorporate LGBTQ+ history—Sinclair, for example, discusses gay identity among cowboys in the 1800s⁴—but it is the most common among those in the study. Olivia Cole, who also includes LGBTQ+ history in lessons on the Harlem Renaissance and teaches her students about the Lavender Scare, called civil rights the “entry point” and said that she “frames it in this context.”⁵ Wells, for example, incorporates the Stonewall riots in her unit on civil rights, segueing from one group’s fight for equality and recognition to another and asking students to discuss the impact of those struggles.⁶ Similarly, Fred Fox included queer rights and Stonewall in lessons on civil rights, asking students to think about how events in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to prominent LGBTQ+ issues today.⁷

Hasmig Minassian, meanwhile, presents topics related to the gay rights movement in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s concurrently with topics related to other civil rights movements of the time. Minassian reported that she disseminates a list of terms and topics to research this era, and that Daughters of Bilitis, Mattachine Society, Stonewall, and Harvey Milk are all on it. Bayard Rustin, too, is on her list; Minassian believes that Rustin is especially important for his contributions to both Black civil rights and gay rights.⁸ Teaching civil rights is a complicated matter regardless of the material on which a teacher focuses or the strategies implemented. For these teachers, presenting the civil rights era as encompassing several different groups’ struggles provides students the opportunity to mine the complexities and significance of that time in a way that they might not be able to by studying the movements in a vacuum. Including key aspects of the LGBTQ+ rights movement of that time is, to them, a necessary aspect to making it more complete.

Studying civil rights, though, is not only learning about the people, organizations, and events of the era. Several teachers present this topic thematically, establishing social change movements or the experiences of marginalized groups as an overall framework and asking students to evaluate the era and all of its parts as a whole, rather than differentiating between overlapping movements at the start. Dana Rosenberg discussed a unit she taught in her US history class in the early 2000s on social change movements, saying, “We basically used this theoretical framework for ‘What is a social change movement?’ and then try to follow that framework for all of those social change movements that [the students] researched.”⁹ Rosenberg explicitly stated that she included gay

rights and the Free Speech Movement in this unit, among others. Using this framework, students could compare and contrast “bigger change moments” and backlash across movements and get a larger sense of the era as a whole.¹⁰

Will Scott similarly created a social justice-oriented curriculum, investigating US history through the theme of violence.¹¹ Scott’s students considered questions including, “When is violence acceptable? When is it not? What does it mean?”¹² In the late 1990s, this unit weaved together gay rights, the civil rights movement, and second wave feminism; while Scott believed that imparting LGBTQ+ history was important in general, he also believed it essential at a time when many were dying of AIDS. Courtney Anderson, meanwhile, taught twentieth century US history using the plight of marginalized groups as a lens. Anderson contended, “Twentieth century history was our focal point and we used the term the rights movements because I don’t think civil rights is just black and white. There are several rights movements that existed and they co-existed.”¹³ When she taught in New York, her unit included a week on LGBT rights and activism, with particular attention on Stonewall because, given the geographic context, that provided students with a landmark with which they connected; this week was part of a larger unit that incorporated and asked students to examine several other group’s struggles, as well.¹⁴ In asking students to consider multiple movements as part of one larger quest for social change, Rosenberg, Scott, and Anderson all required their students to conduct research and complete projects that synthesized this information. For them, this method opened students’ eyes to the similarities between groups and the way that their struggles endure in the present. Integrating gay rights and LGBTQ+ history in this way, then, was a natural fit. Social movements borrow from and foster each other; including gay rights in a study of the civil rights era represents this overlap, achieving the intersectionality for which teachers in this study strive.

The teachers interviewed asserted that civil rights and twentieth century social movements are natural entry points for educators inclined to build an inclusive curriculum, especially when they first set out to do so.¹⁵ The prominence of Stonewall over other LGBTQ+ topics in US history textbooks and other LGBTQ+-inclusive resources attests to that notion, as well. Many of these teachers and scholars in the field note, however, that LGBTQ+ history neither began nor ended with Stonewall. There are other important topics and eras in US history where these educators believe it is important to integrate LGBTQ+ individuals and issues.

The Harlem Renaissance is often taught as a period of creativity and self-expression during which Black people in Harlem and other northern cities

pondered and asserted their identity and role in America through diverse art forms. For Olivia Cole and Courtney Anderson, this is also an important era in LGBTQ+ history. Cole asserted that devoting class time to the LGBT artist community facilitates discussion of LGBTQ+ history across several eras. She therefore includes the role and contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals in the Harlem Renaissance; she opted to focus on “some of the singers during that time period who were openly gay” using materials provided by History UnErased.¹⁶ The Harlem Renaissance is part of a larger unit on race in Anderson’s ninth-grade ethnic studies class. Guided by the notion that no group exists alone in history, she includes a lesson on the LGBT community during the Harlem Renaissance; for Anderson a unit on race is not limited to that construct alone.¹⁷ Lyndsey Schlax, meanwhile, tied the Harlem Renaissance to the larger narrative of the 1920s with lessons on rent parties and evolving ideas of marriage expressed in the literature of the time.¹⁸ The freedoms experienced by people who existed in the enclaves where the Harlem Renaissance thrived extended to marginalized groups and individuals outside of the African American community who also lived their lives on the periphery. The Harlem Renaissance, then, offers ample entry points for teachers who wish to present a more inclusive picture of US history.

Wars are a prominent part of any US history curriculum. War, however, is not simply battles, victory, or defeat. Learning about war also entails understanding its human, national, and international impact. Felicia Perez and Fred Fox both navigate wars’ effects on the LGBTQ+ population in their classes. Perez, for example, introduced the idea of women dressing as men to join the Civil War and asked students to evaluate the way in which some groups, including LGBTQ+ soldiers and civilians, were targeted during the First and Second World Wars, both by the United States’ enemies and within the US military.¹⁹ Moreover, Perez expanded her students’ comprehension of the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s by discussing not only why people generally opposed the Vietnam War but also “why queer folks would be against the war.”²⁰ Fox, an army veteran, also challenged his students to consider the impact of war on people’s ideas about gender. As he said, “I’m really excited about looking at wars and how the changing gender norms impacted openness and created enclaves, and allowed women to wear pants ... So that lesbian women could wear what they felt comfortable in and they could identify themselves better.”²¹ While many works of literature focus on the full spectrum of human experience in wartime, US history classes often present a narrower version of the human cost of war. Thinking about the way that war changes people’s lives and environments can

help make these lessons relevant to students; learning that LGBTQ+ individuals experienced repression and oppression against the backdrop of some of history's greatest struggles provides context and makes evident often unacknowledged complexities, as well.

Although the 1950s is often portrayed as an era of suburban conformity, *Rebel without a Cause* illustrates the opposite perspective. According to Melanie Wells, the movie shows “both how things should be and how 1950s society doesn’t quite live up to that idea.”²² Wells uses this film, and the character of Plato, to expose students to gay life and gay individuals’ plight in 1950s America. Wells helps her students understand Plato’s experiences and the larger implications of being different in a time when it was so important to appear the same. Ultimately Wells’s students understand that in the context of the time “there’s just no space for him to be there.”²³ Mitchell James also challenges his students to juxtapose 1950s conformity against people existing outside of what was considered acceptable, discussing LGBTQ+ history in the context of the Beat Generation. James stated, “We do talk about the existence for being a marginalized person that was designated as gay at that point in time. It was considered a psychological disorder. We talked about it in the frame of reference of the 1950s where you see these conservative values.”²⁴ It is generally acknowledged that the social movements of the late 1950s and 1960s would not have happened if everyone in the country had been included in the postwar prosperity. Often, though, this era’s impact on closeted gays is omitted from classroom discussions. Including it, as Wells and James would attest, provides meaningful context for subsequent lessons.

Supreme Court cases are an excellent barometer of the atmosphere in the United States. Moreover, learning about these cases instills in students an understanding of the Constitution and how it works. Looking at Supreme Court cases, then, can be instructive for students as they think about gay rights, especially when LGBTQ+ history and relevant cases are integrated with precedents established in other areas. Hasmig Minassian asserted, “I always taught *Loving v. Virginia* and I always compare the anti-miscegenation cases to gay and lesbian marriage because [even before the Court’s decision upholding same-sex marriage] when I was teaching it at the time, I knew. I knew we were headed that way.”²⁵ Minassian uses this landmark case to contextualize current events that, she believes, remain unsettled.²⁶ Marriage equality, like myriad other aspects of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, has deep connections to other historical struggles.²⁷ Olivia Cole, meanwhile, uses cases pertaining to gay rights—she specifically mentioned *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003)—to teach her students about the court system. In discussing her LGBTQ+-related lesson plans, she said, “Gay

rights within the Supreme Court, the different rulings of the Supreme Court and the different levels. It's one way that I teach the different levels of the court systems so that they can understand the appeal process and how things get to the Supreme Court."²⁸ It is vital for Cole's special education students that her lessons are focused, structured, and specific. Following one case and taking the time to analyze and evaluate it therefore serves the dual purpose of helping students understand an essential function of the US government as well as one group's fight for equal rights.

These teachers are united in the idea that LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum is necessary and essential. Beyond that, though, the ways in which they incorporate this history are diverse. In general, teachers prioritize different topics and create curriculum based on different sets of circumstances; the same is true of integrating LGBTQ+ history. Mitchell James, for example, devotes significant class time to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and the impact of the Christian conservative movement on the spread of and reaction to HIV and AIDS. James believes that the conservatism of the 1980s continues to impact US politics and society today, thus making this particular area of study important. He reported, "We really focus on it within the context of this time when Reagan and his administration refused to even acknowledge its existence ... how does a population that is a minority in a sense—how does one respond to get their voice heard in a country that is seemingly unwilling to discuss the issue?"²⁹ For many teachers, reaching the 1980s before the end of the school year is difficult; for James, it's a concrete part of his curriculum.

Danny M. Cohen's organization, Unsilence, aims to reveal the "hidden stories of human rights and ... talk about different modes of silencing." Much of Unsilence's work pertains to the Holocaust and the silence that continues to exist around many aspects of it; he pays particular attention to LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences—stories that, in part or in their entirety, are largely ignored. Cohen contended that discussing LGBTQ+ history in a historical context enhances students' comfort level with a potentially sensitive topic. He stated, "We were also able to give permission to the young people to talk about LGBT history and sexual violence at the same time, opening that up in a kind of safe way" because of students' chronological distance from the Holocaust.³⁰ Moreover, because homosexuality was illegal in several nations in the 1940s, many survivors faced additional discrimination and, potentially, imprisonment after the war. Cohen referred to this as the "false liberation of homosexual prisoners";³¹ his organization works to educate students now about their suffering and struggles in the larger context of a catastrophic event.

LGBTQ+ history is also often omitted from units on the Red Scare, or McCarthyism, in the 1950s despite the fact that this population endured discrimination and consequences similar to those accused of communism during this era. During the Lavender Scare, labeling homosexuals as subversive—the same label given to communists—led to the mass firing of anyone suspected of homosexuality within the federal government and publicly revealed their identity. Olivia Cole infuses her lessons on the 1950s with both the Red and Lavender Scares, both of which, she believes, had an important impact on the country and influence the history she teaches subsequently.³² For Cohen, Cole, and the other teachers in this study, persecution is not something experienced by one group at a time and therefore should not be taught as such.

Fred Fox and Courtney Anderson incorporate LGBTQ+ history in their lessons on immigration, another topic with current implications. As Fox considered his unit on immigration he thought, “Let’s talk about sexuality because they were banned. ‘Sexual deviants’ were banned from immigrating to the country. It doesn’t have to be the focus of the lesson; it just needs to be acknowledged that queer folk weren’t allowed to immigrate.”³³ This practice presents a powerful and important idea—the more teachers mention LGBTQ+ individuals and events throughout the curriculum the more integrated and normalized this history becomes. By making LGBTQ+ history present in small and large ways over the course of the year, the omission of the past can slowly be reversed.

Community

Many communities offer resources that facilitate or deepen students’ comprehension of LGBTQ+ history. Five of the teachers explicitly discussed the way in which events, landmarks, museums, exhibits, and archives in their community play a role in determining their topic selection or making the material more authentic to students’ lives.

San Francisco has a thriving LGBTQ+ community and a wealth of history. Among the teachers in that area, Lyndsey Schlax, Hasmig Minassian, and Dana Rosenberg used the city and its history and resources to enliven their lessons and units. Schlax, for example, used the Castro to enhance students’ understanding of “gayborhoods.” Students looked at images of a place that they’ve likely visited throughout their lives, discussed the artwork, graffiti, and representations of gay life that they see there, evaluated how and why such enclaves arose in certain

cities, and analyzed what these neighborhoods, and the sense of belonging they offered to members of the gay community, might mean.³⁴ This task situates history in a place with which students are familiar and an idea—community—with which they can identify.

Minassian and Rosenberg believe that living and teaching in the San Francisco area, where AIDS ravaged the community, demands teaching that epidemic. As Minassian said, “definitely teach about the HIV/AIDS movement in San Francisco in particular. This is a very local history movement for us, in terms of the struggles that happened here ... I came into teaching through a lens of the HIV/AIDS movement.”³⁵ Minassian recalled how immersed she was in this chapter of San Francisco history as a teenager there, leading to her conclusion that bringing it into her own classes was necessary.³⁶ Rosenberg’s students visited the AIDS Memorial at the LGBT Center in San Francisco and interviewed people who were involved in ACT UP. Rosenberg’s teaching career spanned the late 1990s and early 2000s; the activists her students interviewed, then, were deeply involved with advocating for AIDS patients at the height of the epidemic. Her students immersed themselves in that time period and used the resources available to them in the city in which they lived.³⁷ San Francisco offers a wealth of opportunities for students to explore this history and its impact in and outside of the classroom, something these teachers incorporated in their instruction.

In Portland, Fred Fox focused on the Portland vice scandal. He very excitedly related, “So there was this huge scandal here in Portland at the end of the Victorian era [focused on] an underground homosexual group and what’s so fascinating [is] that it’s local history so I think it’s going to blow kids’ minds just to make that sort of connection.”³⁸ This scandal, Fox stated, in which upper-class white men were arrested for sodomy for the first time, crosses and blurs race, class, and sexuality lines, challenging students to think about how all of these factors intersect.³⁹ The Portland vice scandal does not appear in history textbooks available nationally, and few students likely learn about it in their classes. For Fox’s students, though, it made their learning of LGBTQ+ history different, relatable, and relevant.

Courtney Anderson has experience teaching in two regions with significant LGBTQ+ populations: New York and the Bay Area. As a new teacher on the Lower East Side of New York teaching twentieth century social movements, she realized that she had access to an important and compelling resource that could make history seem more real, and less distant, to her students—Stonewall. Anderson remembered, “We really focused a lot on the Stonewall riots because they’re in New York City and a lot of our kids live in that general region so

they could walk by the bar and be like, ‘Oh my God. This is such a momentous thing for New York City history and I can also identify with it.’”⁴⁰ Students often complain that there is little reason to learn history and that they have no interest in things that happened decades or centuries ago. When the places where history was made are a part of their immediate environment, its significance becomes more apparent. Community events, whether well known (Stonewall) or on a smaller scale (Portland vice scandal), can be powerful learning tools.

Focus on Individuals

A preponderance of history education entails learning about major events and their ramifications; focusing on individuals—beyond the major historical figures covered in most schools’ curricula—is rarer. Students better identify with classroom material, though, when presented with a personal lens or perspective on the events and phenomena about which they learn. Four of the teachers, therefore, pay specific attention to LGBTQ+ individuals who contributed to the larger historical moments students study.

According to Felicia Perez, students can access history by learning about individuals and the events and circumstances of their lifetimes. Discussing Harvey Milk and Sylvia Rivera, two figures whose lives and contributions Perez introduced to her students, she asserted, “They would find out about these individuals and these people and then that would inherently lead them down this road of finding out these events that we might not cover, that might not come out in a particular event or we might not be able to spend a lot of time there but you should know who these people are.”⁴¹ Perez named several people and groups of people whom she specifically referenced in her class including the Taino and Sarah Edmonds, a woman who dressed as a man to fight in the Civil War, because their lives and experiences are historically important and rich and because learning about LGBTQ+ lives in the past can help immerse students in history in the present.⁴²

Olivia Cole also uses figures from the past to engage her students and help them understand the larger concepts she teaches. For Cole’s students, many of whom have little experience with the LGBTQ+ population in their personal lives and for whom there is a negative connotation attached to LGBTQ+ individuals, starting the year looking at people, as opposed to mass movements, increases their comfort with this topic. She related that she will often show her students a picture of Calamity Jane and ask them to describe the individual they see. As

she said, “everyone back in the day is wearing these floppy hats and they look really sullen and they all looked kind of dirty. You can’t tell but just leaving it up there, I could see their little wheels turning and I called on one of the kids ... He was like, ‘Well miss, that’s a woman.’”⁴³ Although Cole willingly answers students’ questions about her own life, asking them to study LGBTQ+ history was an additional leap for a group that, she stated, “still [wasn’t] comfortable using the term gay and girlfriend and things like that. They were still bad words to them.”⁴⁴ Starting their study with individuals, then, laid a foundation for the material Cole would teach later.

For Hasmig Minassian and Casey Sinclair, it is necessary to focus on individuals to reverse their absence from people’s historical memory. Minassian prioritizes including LGBTQ+ people over activism in her classes because, in her opinion, it is the people who so often go unnoticed and unacknowledged. Minassian contended that, unlike other minority groups, there are no immediately defining physical characteristics of the majority of LGBTQ+ historical figures and, therefore, their sexuality, and the fact that a gay man or woman played a vital role in a movement or era, goes largely and erroneously ignored.⁴⁵ Minassian, therefore, tries to incorporate LGBTQ+ figures with whom students are not familiar and LGBTQ+ lifestyles of figures that they know in an attempt to make these people and their lives more visible. Similarly, Sinclair declared, “Because so much of the history is erased, because these people’s stories didn’t get told there are so many questions about who they were and what they really did.”⁴⁶ She pays specific attention to Jane Addams and the women in the settlement house movement, challenging students to evaluate not only what they accomplished for others but also how their own identities existed in and outside of that environment.⁴⁷ Through this study, Sinclair’s students learn about important historical figures and a movement that changed thousands of people’s lives as well as how this movement influenced and was influenced by the lives of those who sustained it. Moreover, as students learn about the ways that people in the past submerged their true selves these individuals become less hidden.

Putting the Spotlight on LGBTQ+ History

Integrating LGBTQ+ history throughout the US history curriculum in an authentic, organic way is an ideal goal, one that a majority of the teachers interviewed implemented. The nature of history education, though, is that throughout the course of an academic year, particular groups’ history or

contributions to history become the focus of a lesson or unit. Although total integration is the goal for many, the demands of the discipline and the time—especially as teachers continue to figure out how best to bring this information into their classes—may also lead to lessons, units, and classes specifically focused on LGBTQ+ history.

California in the twenty-first century has been the focus of significant national attention as a battleground for LGBTQ+ rights. It is not surprising, then, given the prominence of these issues, that more than half of the teachers (seven in total) participating in this study teach/taught in California. Among them, Courtney Anderson, Hasmig Minassian, and Felicia Perez devote specific time in their required classes to events and individuals involved with and affecting the LGBTQ+ population. Anderson's unit on sex, gender, and sexuality, the intention for which is to "blow open the spectrum a little bit about traditional gender roles among other things," aims to promote "different understandings about what we call the LGBT community and what [that has meant] throughout history."⁴⁸ Felicia Perez, meanwhile, decorated her room with posters she gathered from the ACLU "of queer people who were making history and had made history, and it talked about how they were queer, how they were gay, how they were these prolific and important people." Teaching in a third-floor classroom with no windows, Perez was left on her own to find a way to open her room to the outside world. She chose to do so by exposing students to individuals and accomplishments they might not have known about previously and, through these posters and discussion of them, indicated the history students would learn.⁴⁹ In addition to units that integrate LGBTQ+ history thematically, Hasmig Minassian devotes time to exploring important events in LGBTQ+ history, like Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic, on their own merit. Making connections between moments and events in history is a priority, but focusing on aspects of history of which students, as Minassian said, have "zero knowledge"⁵⁰ is important, as well. Without specific content knowledge, after all, key components are omitted when those larger, thematic connections are made.

For a few teachers the best way to convey LGBTQ+ history was to design and teach classes solely devoted to this topic. In these classes, time becomes easier to manage, students are aware of the subject matter they will learn, and the nuances of LGBTQ+ history can be explored in depth in ways that might not happen in a survey course. Though electives are wonderful in conveying in-depth information and offering students the opportunity to mine a topic in more profound ways, relying on electives as a primary means to teach LGBTQ+

history can be problematic. First, as previously stated, electives are a privilege most often available in well-funded schools or schools with alternative curricula. Second, not all students take them, and those that do self-select. Third, teaching LGBTQ+ history as its own elective, separate from a comprehensive telling of US history, maintains this distinction. In fact, Fred Fox pushed for his elective because he believed in the value of this material and, though survey courses at his school began to integrate information on Stonewall, he believed that more had to be done and was not.⁵¹

Teaching an elective was not a choice for Casey Sinclair. Given the instructional design of her school, it was not a matter of whether to teach an elective but what the subject matter would be. The curriculum development group with which she worked was motivated to bring LGBTQ+ history into US history classrooms, thus a course was born. Sinclair recalled, “We really took an intersectional lens. We really looked at people’s identities and who they were and what people they were representing and all those kinds of things; what about that was important for that historical moment.”⁵² For Sinclair, her students’ ability to examine and profoundly understand this community and its history was of the utmost importance. As she stated, “I think part of it is identifying texts that show the fluidity of sexuality and then look for many different characters in history and try to imagine and understand the various pressures that were on people and how they are different from what we see now ... and how have things evolved and how have they not.”⁵³ In a traditional US history survey class, Sinclair would not have the same freedom or flexibility in her approach. Here, she could prioritize engagement and deep, internalized comprehension over breadth of coverage.

When Lyndsey Schlax was approached about teaching an LGBTQ+ history elective, she first had to learn the information that she would be expected to know at its helm. Having never learned this history herself, it was as new to her as it would be to her students. She had, however, learned about other movements for social justice and already valued this lens as an overall theme in her teaching. An LGBTQ+ history class, then, corresponded with her established philosophy.⁵⁴ Schlax designed her class around students’ discoveries; it was important to her that her students realize all the history they missed in their previous studies. She asserted, “I wanted them to have that, ‘Oh my gosh! I see it. I see this experience. I see these people. I see that they’ve always been around and I see that they haven’t been represented’ [moment].”⁵⁵ To accomplish that, Schlax used a diverse set of resources that tended heavily toward podcasts and began with the history of gender and sexuality, the differences between them, and the idea that “there have always been gender nonconforming people, they just don’t end up in your

history books.”⁵⁶ Schlax applied these ideas throughout her semester-long class, in which students examine LGBTQ+ history throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her unit on marriage equality, for example, focuses not only on whether same-sex couples are entitled to this right, but dissent on the topic within the LGBTQ+ community. She explained, “We talked a lot about—there are a lot of people who are fighting for the right to get married. There’s a whole pile of people who are fighting just to destroy marriage because nobody should have to get married because that’s a pile of BS. So, like this push and pull of subversive and confrontation and desire for legitimacy.”⁵⁷ Only in this kind of elective do most teachers have time to immerse students in a study of this issue’s complexities.

Fred Fox’s class likewise explored queer history in a nonbinary way, evaluating the multiple experiences of people and groups that identify as LGBTQ+ or are gender nonconforming. These labels, and their impact, are important to Fox, who intended to begin his class by looking at “profiles of pre-gay, nineteenth, eighteenth century Americans who are gender nonconforming, who today we might call transgender or we might call a lesbian” and consider whether these modern labels can be appropriately applied to people and lifestyles in the past.⁵⁸ For Fox, who taught at a school where a two-day unit on Stonewall in US history classes was an accomplishment for LGBTQ+ history education—as it is and would be in schools across the country—looking at the history students know from a completely different perspective was an exciting prospect. Like Schlax, Fox’s class included the impact of world wars, immigration, and current issues; he later included colonialism and its impact on queer communities and cultures.⁵⁹ Students often complain that they learn the same history multiple times over the course of their education. In Fox’s class, as well as in Schlax and Sinclair’s classes, the events might be the same but the perspective is not.

Building Historical Skills

Effectively teaching LGBTQ+ history, like other topics, involves more than disseminating information. Students must evaluate and digest this subject matter like they would any other, especially considering that for many students this information, studied in an historical context, is brand new. The teachers in this study, therefore, understand that it is not enough to simply introduce LGBTQ+ history; they must also guide their students in building the skills to understand

RESOURCES & STRATEGIES

Resources include:

- Visual sources – photographs, artwork, posters, images, etc.
- Text sources – primary and secondary sources, excerpted readings, biographies, scholarly articles, essays, etc.
- Timelines
- Supreme Court decisions
- Multimedia sources – movies, podcasts, music, etc.
- Language analysis
- Local newspapers and archives
- Student-written and -produced plays
- Oral histories and interviews
- *Queer History of the United States*
- Current events materials
- Field Trips (including museums)

Assignments and Strategies:

- Weave LGBTQ history throughout the curriculum
- Focus on language and vocabulary
- Make connections to students' lives
- Research papers/presentations
- Socratic seminars/class discussion
- Written, artistic, and creative assignments
- Social justice oriented curriculum
- Student-conducted interviews with parents and community members
- Text analysis/differentiated reading assignments/evaluating multiple perspectives
- Exploration of “erased” history
- Use of current events to connect past and present
- Project-based curriculum

Figure 9.2 Teacher resources and strategies. The teachers reported using a variety of tactics to convey LGBTQ+ history to their students.

and apply it. The requirements for doing so differ as student populations and school resources do. Nevertheless, each of these educators discussed specific ways in which their students learned LGBTQ+ history and expressed their historical discoveries (see Figure 9.2).

Often when students learn a new topic, they must also learn the language and vocabulary necessary to discuss that material. This is especially true of potentially sensitive or controversial topics like LGBTQ+ history, where it is imperative that students understand specific terminology and use it appropriately, as well as grasp the ways in which language might be used offensively. Building language and vocabulary skills are the foundation of this unit for Olivia Cole. She said, “The first thing I normally have to deal with is the language. What are they using? What kind of words do they use to describe and how do they explain and speak in a sensitive and not a derogatory way? That’s the first step.”⁶⁰ While

Lyndsey Schlax's students didn't face the same learning obstacles as Cole's, she, too, focused on language development to start her course. Schlax's students spent a semester navigating this material, and it was therefore important that they understood not only the language and terminology that they used but also the nuances in language as it applied to gender and sexuality in English and other languages.⁶¹ Fred Fox, meanwhile, considered language from a different perspective. History students have a tendency to apply present day standards and ideas to the past; therefore, in planning his course, Fox questioned the use of twenty-first-century labels in a class that spans decades. He questioned, "How fair is it to impose a modern understanding on the past?"⁶² Schlax and Fox have more time and opportunity to discuss evolving terminology and ideas relating to gender and sexual identity, providing their students with context that they likely wouldn't receive in a survey course. Considering the plethora of ways that language is invoked around this topic, to Schlax and Fox this study is significant.

The teachers in this study incorporate a vast array of sources in their classes, from text to visual images to film and other forms of media to field trips that explore students' communities. Reading and evaluating primary and secondary sources and using them to compare, contrast, and make connections remain key aspects in comprehending history at the secondary level. Sinclair, for example, selected and presented her students with truncated readings and questions to guide them, often asking what might be controversial and what evidence the reading presented for students to defend their positions.⁶³ Through this practice, students build reading comprehension and argumentation skills. Students in Danny M. Cohen's Unsilence workshops participate in interactive text analysis, navigating personal histories by choosing the part of the story with which they want to engage next. "The Son," for example, presents students with testimony written by a gay son of Holocaust survivors in which he discusses the tragedy they endured and his experience watching his peers die of AIDS. Students consider how this story resonates with them and make authentic connections as they read.⁶⁴ Melanie Wells also asks students to analyze documents around her lessons on LGBTQ+ history, particularly in connection with her unit on *Rebel without a Cause* if time allows. The document analysis enriches the students' experience and understanding of the film and provides them with greater context of the era portrayed. Wells also provides students with scholarly articles on this topic as a summer assignment, making them available for extra credit owing to the timing and difficulty of the sources.⁶⁵

The flexibility of the elective format allowed Lyndsey Schlax to incorporate several different types of sources, including text and visual primary sources.

Schlax described a class period as a time in which students listened to music from a particular era while they analyze primary sources from that time period; she provided the example of listening to Bessie Smith while students read documents about the Harlem Renaissance. Schlax also devoted class time to honing this skill with her students. She stated, “I walk them through how to analyze a primary document: How do you question this document? Who is the audience? Who created it? Who’s likely to see it? ... What bias may have existed in this document?”⁶⁶ These skills were important for students’ success in Schlax’s class, especially as they examined and evaluated loaded topics and questions. Additionally, developing a command of these skills allows students to be successful beyond Schlax’s class and in other academic endeavors.

Among the indications of what students have learned are the ways in which they can reflect upon and apply that knowledge. For many of these teachers, assessment is not a test; it is a more in-depth measure of students’ facility with all they learned about LGBTQ+ history. Dana Rosenberg, Hasmig Minassian, and Courtney Anderson require students to research and write about a specific topic pertaining to social movements, with many focusing on some aspect of LGBTQ+ history. Mitchell James’s students interview their parents about the AIDS epidemic and write papers on their findings. James posited, “I want my students to speak with people who lived through it to get a sense of how they viewed the epidemic ... what they were aware of with regard to the gay population, what they knew of with regard to the gay population that was in fact fighting for research funding and drug testing and access to better drugs.”⁶⁷ James thus put a twist on the traditional term paper, asking students to work as historians to gather original information. Will Scott’s students wrote and performed a play about the information they learned, presenting their history of violence dramatically as well as writing investigative papers on a related topic.⁶⁸ Fred Fox’s students designed and presented personal interest research projects, producing, for example, documentary films and wall murals.⁶⁹ Lyndsey Schlax, meanwhile, engaged students in an art analysis project, in which, after studying LGBTQ+ artists and their contribution to the community, students “chose a piece of art,” created a placard for it, and “put on a gallery opening.”⁷⁰ For Schlax, who taught at a specialized arts school, this project both reflected what students learned in her class and engaged their talents and sensibilities. Material effectively conveyed can contribute to a variety of outcomes and expressions. Students’ buy-in to their lessons on LGBTQ+ history is evident in the work they are able to produce when these units or classes conclude.

Research indicates that innovative approaches and immersive experiences can be meaningful to students' ability to retain and internalize the information that they learn.⁷¹ Projects like James's, Scott's, Schlax's, and Fox's are the types of educational experiences that make an impact. It is essential to evaluate not only how much students learn or how much time they spend learning it but also whether or not the ways they learn it are effective. Based on teacher observations and assessments, learning this history expands students' ideas and knowledge base about LGBTQ+ history and the practice of "doing history" in general. This, then, indicates that the strategies are effective, an important first step as the presence of the content increases in these, and other, classrooms.

Bringing the Past into the Present

Several of the teachers in this study, regardless of their sexual orientation, claimed that including LGBTQ+ history in their classrooms was a part of their effort to reverse years of omission and silence.⁷² The lessons, units, projects, and resources they described have the power to do just that. Danny M. Cohen, whose organization is named for this purpose, believes in the importance of and supports all efforts at Holocaust education; his work is different than other organizations oriented around that goal because, in addition, it promotes students and teachers discovering and discussing the "silenced" narrative of that time. Revealing and asking students to ponder and discuss the Holocaust through the lens of gay victims and survivors is new terrain for most of the student groups and educators with whom he works.⁷³ Casey Sinclair, whose students engaged in in-depth explorations of LGBTQ+ history and individuals, maintained this focus and intensity "because so much of the history is erased, because these people's stories didn't get told, there are so many questions about who they were and what they really did."⁷⁴

Fred Fox and Courtney Anderson thought more specifically about the role of the storyteller, and that person's power to influence what generations of students know about US history. Fox began his class by "talking about the process of history because we're going to be looking at how much of this history has been erased."⁷⁵ Anderson, too, stated, "Actually what we're focusing on right now is looking at omission and sugarcoating in history, who writes history, who gets to decide that, and why does it matter";⁷⁶ she applies this query to the broad scope of history, LGBTQ+ history included.

These educators, then, through the work they do in their classrooms and with their students, harness their power as the storyteller to share important and relevant information to which so few are exposed. Their classroom practices begin the work of unsilencing and acknowledging history that is as much a part of the American experience as the majority of what students regularly learn in their US history classes.