

Chapter 39

Creating Digital Safe Spaces for Gender Expression and Sexual Diversity

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ABSTRACT

A school is where individuals go to learn regardless of their ethnicity, physical appearance, physical and/or mental abilities, gender, or sexual orientation. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) population of students generally face discrimination and/or misunderstanding in diverse groups of students. This chapter is designed to help educators better recognize this group of individuals and to ensure their right to a safe learning environment. Additionally, this chapter includes advice for educators to help students better understand personal sharing in the digital world, in dealing with and preventing cyberbullying, and with creating digital safe spaces for everyone, including LGBTQ students. Advice for preventing and dealing with cyberbullying is also included for administrators, parents, and students.

INTRODUCTION

Presently, many educators, parents, and communities are concerned with creating safe spaces for children, especially within schools. A school is where individuals go to learn regardless of their ethnicity, physical appearance, physical and/or mental abilities, gender/gender identity, or sexual orientation. These learning environments need to be areas free from stereotyping, marginalization, harassment, intimidation, bullying, and violence. Another level of complexity to creating a safe learning space is that most of these unacceptable behaviors now happen online, not in the classroom, and not in front of a teacher. Educators must now recognize that many classroom issues and concerns bleed over into the digital domains of Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, Vine, Instagram, Yik Yak, ooVoo, and so on. Moreover, technology-based tools are increasingly brought into the classroom as teaching tools. Parents,

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administrators, and teachers, all sing the praises of these digital teaching tools; however, Internet access allows for gossip to flow in cyberspace and can potentially breed cyberbullying. How can an educator protect his or her students in this realm of virtual prattling? How can an educator create a digital safe space for student learning?

One group, in particular, has recently been the focus of attention with the April, 2015, revelation that Bruce Jenner was transforming into Caitlyn Jenner, and the June, 2015, ruling of the United States Supreme Court that same-sex marriage is legal nationwide in the United States. These mainstream news stories have brought attention to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) population. The public gender transformation and lawful same-sex marriages have generated some serious conversations with students who can identify with these issues and with many more students who have general questions about these topics. For example, many parents, as well as teachers, were faced with difficult questions by students of all ages trying to understand complex issues like gender, identity, sexuality, and marriage. Conversely, the introduction of Caitlyn Jenner and the legalization of same-sex marriage caused many jokes, memes, and trash-talk to become mainstream through social media, late night talk shows, and Internet video clips which were repeated and distributed in classrooms – marginalizing students who may be LGBTQ. How do we, as educators, ensure no one in our classrooms is belittled, ostracized, or made to feel insignificant and worthless? How do we, as educators, guarantee that all students, including those who are LGBTQ, have a safe space to learn?

Students of all levels, P-12 through post-secondary, need a safe space to learn. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) population of students generally face discrimination and/or misunderstanding in diverse groups of students. This chapter is designed to help educators better recognize this group of individuals and to ensure their right to a safe learning environment or, more specifically, a digital safe space.

GENDER IDENTITY/GENDER EXPRESSION

Definitions

(Please note that definitions for each section are synthesized from various research, websites, and experts in the field, but are worded in such a way to help readers who are unfamiliar with these subjects):

- **Biological Gender:** The sex or gender that a person is born with, their genetic gender, is often referred to as biological gender.
- **Gender:** Although gender is a term commonly used today, it has different meanings for different situations, cultures, and societies. For our purposes, gender is a set of social, physical, psychological and emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classifies an individual as feminine, masculine, androgynous or other.
- **Gender Expression:** The outward manifestation of internal gender identity, through clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms and other characteristics is how gender is expressed, or considered one's gender expression.

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