

Interrupting Inequities

Developed by Dave Lehman with thanks to friend and colleague Anne Rhodes for the original version of these adapted activities.

Purpose:

- To gain a deeper awareness of hurtful heterosexual and homophobic things being said and done among students and staff in your school (the focus could be adapted to address racist, sexist or classist remarks and practices as needed).
- To work on ways to effectively interrupt inequitable behaviors that are biased and unfair to members of your school community

Time: 1-2 hours depending on the size of the group and the number of incidents discussed.

Part I

Recognizing Heterosexist & Homophobic Incidents of Bias

The following is a list of actual homophobic or heterosexist incidents of bias which have taken place in middle and high schools. [Participants may read these silently at first, then add their own examples of incidents they have witnessed or heard about at their school] (10-20 minutes depending on whether participants add their own incidents).

The Incidents

1. You hear students walking down the hall together using the word "faggot" as a way to put each other down.
2. A staff member is overheard in the office referring to the student-organized day to address homophobia as "sexual confusion" day instead of an "infusion" day.
3. A boy in the school reports that his father objects to his learning about homophobia in school and says that "Gay men and their homosexual activities are the cause of AIDS."
4. Male staff members overreact in embarrassment and have to joke about it and slap each other on the shoulder when they accidentally touch each other.
5. Student is overheard saying that: "...all dykes hate men; they're all ball-busters."
6. You hear through the grapevine that some young women in the school are upset because someone yelled "Dykes are ugly," and everybody laughed.
7. A staff member at a staff social event is talking about what he perceives to be a lack of empathy among students for the work that teachers do. He says "when they get married and have kids and have a full-time job, maybe then they'll understand."
8. In a class discussion, a student of color says that "all gays are white," and that homophobia is not an issue for people of color.
9. In an informal discussion, one student confronts another about a homophobic comment, and is told they were just kidding and to "lighten up."
10. A staff member says that homophobic harassment and violence are not a problem here.
11. Students discussing another student who is not present comment on her black boots and short hair, and laugh when somebody says she's probably a lesbian.
12. Staff members covering historical or current events fail to mention that some of the prominent people discussed are gay or lesbian.
13. Staff member teaching Sex Ed in a Health class does not mention gay, lesbian or bisexual sexuality, and only talks about heterosexual intercourse.
14. Gay and lesbian students come into school extremely upset because a gay student at another local high school was beaten up. Other students tell them that it was his own fault because he "should have known not to dress like that and tell people he was queer."
15. Students are encouraged to ask their mother and father if either would be interested in participating in a committee at school.
16. Staff attitudes about heterosexual romances at school are positive and supportive, but lesbian dating is seen as a "fad" or as another way for girls to rebel or be "different," like getting a nose ring.
17. Students in school are spreading a rumor that a gay student is suicidal after being rebuffed by another boy. Neither boy is out to the staff.
18. A presenter from a local organization talks to students about date rape and violence from a completely heterosexual perspective.
19. Staff person questioning why staff has to go to diversity sessions says they "don't understand why we are taking so much time to focus on this issue."
20. Staff members are talking about a

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student whose parents are gay. One of them says "I bet you a hundred dollars that kid turns out gay too."

21. Except for the out members of the staff, people in the school assume that everyone is exclusively heterosexual, particularly if they see a partner of the opposite sex.
22. Staff members gossiping together assume that a single older staff member must be gay.
23. A bisexual student reports to you that a friend told them "You're confused. Just make up your mind what you want to be."

Process

1. Have pairs or small groups discuss the impact of an incident on the students and staff involved and on the whole school community. Each pair/small group will report out to the larger group. (20-30 minutes).

2. Individual Writing time - for each of the incidents chosen write down any suggestions about what could be done immediately, soon after or in the long-term - notice especially which interventions you think would be difficult for you personally and why. (10-15 minutes):

- a) immediately in the situation (to interrupt the behavior)
- b) next, soon after, later the same day or the next day (to educate)
- c) long-term/proactive (to create student and staff leadership in this area)

3. Whole Group discussion - participants share with the large group their suggestions related to the 3 steps above - a) immediate, b) soon after, and c) long-term/proactive (10-30 minutes depending on the number of small groups and incidents discussed):

4. Debrief Part I of the Protocol (5-10 minutes)

Part II

How do you interrupt or intervene when you see/hear heterosexist or homophobic speech/practice?

1. Brainstorm in the whole group possible kinds of interventions [the following is a partial list] and ask for an example of each (10 minutes):

Humor.

Turn it around.

Offer correct information.

Ask for more information.

Ask questions.

Address underlying hurt.

Exaggerate original comment.

Listen carefully.

Join with the other person.

Show pleasure for opportunity to discuss.

2. In choosing what intervention to make, consider - What, When, Where, How? Discuss in general the following questions in the whole group - Would it be more effective now or later? Would it be more effective one-to-one and in private, or with the whole group? Is this something that one person needs to change, everyone needs to learn, or the whole community needs to establish norms about? (10 minutes)

3. By way of review/overview, put the following chart on newsprint (chalkboard, overhead, or power point) and distribute it as a handout as well; ask for any clarifying questions (5 minutes):

Levels/Stages of Intervention - Progression toward long-term change

- Interrupt the behavior, or change the dynamics that support it - Stop! Invoke rules or guidelines. Consequences / discipline. Alter the context.
- Educate - Why should they stop? Why the behavior is hurtful. Provide information, correct misinformation.
- Create opportunity for leadership - Validate the person. Encourage self-examination. Provide way to practice new skills.

4. Put the following on newsprint (chalkboard, overhead, or power point) and distribute it as a handout as well; ask for any clarifying questions (5-10 minutes):

How to choose?

Consider...

- your relationship with the person
- the situation
- how much time you have
- your energy level
- the impact on the other in the situation
- how clear/confused you are
- their mood

What helps?

empathy
connection
opportunity
no defensiveness
self-awareness
no blame

Continue with Part II for practice on specific examples of incidents of bias or prejudice that need interrupting.

5. Debrief the process.

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practice. I hope folks will move from seeing it as all about their subjects to seeing that it's all about the students.

I hope as an administrator I'll be able to provide the follow-up, the extra push or accountability that's needed to transform our practice.

What's your greatest fear?

My greatest fear is that teachers will pay lip service without really changing their practice or improving instruction. I don't want to be involved in lots of planning unless it leads to changes in the classrooms.

What's your greatest hope and greatest fear for NSRF in the next period?

I think the organization is evolving and needs to continue to find ways to reach all students and not just the kids in the classrooms of the teachers who are the first ones to volunteer for CFGs. I think we need to expose everyone to best practices continually. My hope and fear for NSRF are related to my hopes and fears for my school. I hope we continue to connect our ideas to real changes in practice. I'm always worried about talk without action and hope we will hold ourselves accountable to each other in support of our students. ■

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were unsure about giving me this letter, and I am happy that you did. It shows a lot about your character, that you are brave, thoughtful, and caring. It also helps me to understand you better so that I can make class better for you.

I see that you are raising your hand and asking questions A LOT more than you did when I began teaching, and it is my goal now to make sure I am there to be answering your questions. I would like to ask you to write me another letter in a few weeks to let me know if you think class is getting better.

Thank you,
Rachel

Rachel later said that she really appreciated this exercise and how it allowed her to think about her initial questions. The *Connections* editorial board is wondering how others would respond to Vivian's letter and invite you to try this same reflective activity. To continue the shared reflection and learning we hope you will post your own letters to Vivian on our website at www.sfcess.org! ■

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Protocols in Practice
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Thanks to friend and colleague Anne Rhodes - who lives outside of Ithaca in Freeville, New York and is a facilitator/trainer working on "Creating Inclusive Schools" - for the original version of these activities which I have adapted. ■

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