

Facilitating Courageous Conversations

The work of fostering braver learning climates involves an openness to have courageous conversations with your students and with all members of the school community, including other educators, administrators, and guardians/parents.

Consider the following scenarios:

Scenario 1: You are the staff advisor of a recently formed Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at your Catholic school. The GSA members have submitted a proposal to the school's administration to hold a moment of silence on the morning announcements to honour Transgender Day of Remembrance. The principal at your school has declined the proposal citing concerns about backlash they expect from some parents.

Scenario 2: During parent-teacher interview night, the parent of one of your grade 11 Family Studies students has raised concerns about the inclusion of Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (2SLGBTQI) authors and topics on your course syllabus. They feel the curriculum imposes on the right of some families to their religious beliefs with respect to its teaching on homosexuality. They worry the curriculum will promote youth to identify with 2SLGBTQI identities.

Scenario 3: You are facilitating a discussion about strategies to tackle bullying in your grade 9 social studies class. The topic of homophobic and transphobic bullying comes up in the group discussion. One student makes a comment which insinuates that 2SLGBTQI intolerant attitudes in the school climate are to be attributed to a growing population of racialized faith communities present in the school.

How would you respond?

To help you think through how you might approach each scenario, consider the following advice on facilitating courageous conversations related to 2SLGBTQI inclusion at the intersection of faith identities and faith-based settings.

Approach with compassion

- Being called to examine one's deeply held ideas (sometimes referred to as "unlearning") is an inherently vulnerable and uncomfortable process. In order to grow, people need to feel like they can work through difficult emotions that may come up without feeling attacked or shamed (The ArQuives, 2021).

- Coming at a person with criticism and judgment is only likely to create more resistance, especially if it is calling into question mindsets that they have simply been raised to have (The ArQuives, 2021).
- Empathize by acknowledging that our instinct to protect what we know comes from a universal human need for familiarity and security but that this should not come at the expense of those less secure than us (SXSWEdu, 2017).
- Apply emotional sensitivity by listening and responding not only to the content of a person's comments but to the feelings underlying them. Gently plant seeds to gauge the person's capacity to engage further (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; The ArQuives, 2021).

Point to the impacts

- Remind people that while everyone is entitled to their opinion, sometimes opinions can translate into language, behaviors, norms, and even policies that cause active harm to others (The ArQuives, 2021).
- We have all been socialized in different ways. The work of fostering braver learning climates will necessarily involve a deep reflection on which parts of our socialization we want to hang onto, and which parts we want to rewrite in order to do less harm.
- Equip yourself with concrete evidence of immediate and long-term negative consequences of school communities that fail to be inclusive to 2SLGBTQI members (Peter, et al., 2021). For example, cite data from the Still in Every Class Report, and others like it by checking out the Additional Learning Resources.

Find common ground

- Most faith traditions share deep ties to the values of social justice and human rights. This includes respect for human dignity, compassion and loving kindness, safeguarding the sanctity of life, and treating others as we would wish to be treated (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).
- Offer a framing for thinking about protecting 2SLGBTQI members of our communities as not diminishing religious teachings but rather as honouring another important side to them. (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).
- Use this framework to contend with those who claim that their right to a particular belief system somehow overrides 2SLGBTQI human rights (The ArQuives, 2021).

Lean on policy and legislation

- Offer reminders that regardless of our personal beliefs, all Ontario school boards, Catholic Boards included, are required to comply with Ontario Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. Furthermore, schools are bound by federal and provincial human rights laws which protect all people from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in a similar way it protects people from discrimination on the grounds of religion (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).
- Emphasize that every student has the right to a safe and positive learning environment in which they are reflected (Peter, et al., 2021; Kosciw, et al., 2020; GLSEN, n.d.). Counter the myth that 2SLGBTQI-inclusive education encourages students to identify as 2SLGBTQI. Instead, focus on how it teaches appreciation and respect for the visible and invisible differences between people, a critical lesson for all students (The ArQuives, 2021).

Highlight a growing movement

- Point out that religious institutions are not static nor unchangeable. They have always evolved to meet the needs, realities, and challenges of society across the course of history.
- Highlight a growing movement of diverse faith communities that are reevaluating their part in past harms committed in the name of faith and learning to revere the rich complexity of human experience.
- Moves to embrace positive change are happening in faith communities everywhere. Students have a growing appetite for these conversations.
- Check out the Additional Learning Resources Handout to cite specific examples of organizations that are part of this movement.

Reflective Worksheet

Consider the following scenario again:

Scenario 1: You are the staff advisor of a recently formed Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at your Catholic school. The GSA members have submitted a proposal to the school's administration to hold a moment of silence on the morning announcements to honour Transgender Day of Remembrance. The principal at your school has declined the proposal citing concerns about backlash they expect from some parents.

What tactics do you think could be effective to help you facilitate a courageous conversation in response?

- Approach with compassion
- Point to the impacts
- Find common ground
- Lean on policy and legislation
- Highlight a growing movement
- Other tactics:

Craft a potential response in the space below:

Consider the following scenario again:

Scenario 2: During parent-teacher interview night, the parent of one of your grade 11 Family Studies students has raised concerns about the inclusion of Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (2SLGBTQI) authors and topics on your course syllabus. They feel the curriculum imposes on the right of some families to their religious beliefs with respect to its teaching on homosexuality. They worry the curriculum will promote youth to identify with 2SLGBTQI identities.

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Scenario 3: You are facilitating a discussion about strategies to tackle bullying in your grade 9 social studies class. The topic of homophobic and transphobic bullying comes up in the group discussion. One student makes a comment which insinuates that 2SLGBTQI intolerant attitudes in the school climate are to be attributed to a growing population of racialized faith communities present in the school.

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- Approach with compassion
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- Find common ground
- Lean on policy and legislation
- Highlight a growing movement
- Other tactics:

Craft a potential response in the space below:

Can you think of a past situation related to 2SLGBTQI inclusion and faith that you felt called for a courageous conversation? What happened? How did you respond?

Record your reflections in the space below:

What tactics did you use? Would you change anything about your response if you could go back to that moment? How would you respond differently?

Knowing what you know now, what tactics do you think could have been effective?

- Approach with compassion
- Point to the impacts
- Find common ground
- Lean on policy and legislation
- Highlight a growing movement
- Other tactics:

Craft a potential response in the space below: