


# Out in the classroom: Self-disclosure as a 'pedagogical tool'

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**Background:** In South African higher education, LGBTQ+-identifying educators often navigate heteronormative and cisnormative spaces that marginalise their identities. Self-disclosure by LGBTQ+ educators have the potential to disrupt these norms and foster inclusivity, but it also carries personal and professional risks.

**Objectives:** This autoethnographic study explores the transformative potential and challenges of self-disclosure by LGBTQ+ educators in South African higher education, focusing on my experiences as a gay professor.

**Methods:** The study employs an autoethnographic approach, drawing on my personal narratives, reflections and artefacts related to my experiences of self-disclosure in the classroom. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, informed by critical and transgressive pedagogies and queer theory.

**Results:** Disclosure about my sexual orientation confused students' assumptions that I am heterosexual. It challenged their prejudices about LGBTQ+ identities. It also created opportunities for critical dialogue and fostered a more inclusive classroom environment. However, this article also reveals the institutional and social barriers that continue to marginalise LGBTQ+ voices in South African education.

**Conclusions:** Self-disclosure by LGBTQ+ educators can be a transformative pedagogical tool for challenging oppressive norms and fostering social justice in education. However, it is a complex and risky process that requires institutional support and personal resilience.

**Contribution:** The study highlights the need for further research on LGBTQ+ educators' experiences and pedagogical practices in South Africa and beyond.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+ educators; self-disclosure; heteronormativity; autoethnography; South African higher education; cisnormativity.

## Introduction

The complex interplay between personal identity, professional roles and pedagogical practices has been a subject of increasing interest in educational research, particularly in relation to the experiences of LGBTQ+ educators (Connell, 2014; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Russell, 2021; Toledo & Maher, 2021). In the South African context, where the post-apartheid constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation (Republic of South Africa, 1996), the question of how LGBTQ+-identifying educators negotiate their identities within heteronormative and cisnormative educational spaces remains a critical concern (Francis, 2022; Msibi, 2019).

This autoethnographic study explores the transformative potential of self-disclosure by LGBTQ+-identifying educators in South African higher education, focusing on my experiences as a gay professor. Self-disclosure, the sharing of personal information about oneself to others, has been recognised as a powerful pedagogical tool that can foster student engagement, build trust and create a more inclusive classroom environment (Beagan et al., 2023; Cayanus, 2004; Miller et al., 2014). However, for LGBTQ+-identifying educators, the decision to disclose their sexual orientation in the classroom is a complex and risky one, fraught with personal and professional challenges (Grace & Benson, 2000; Harbeck, 1997; Liddle, 1997). While this study focuses on my experiences as a gay man, it is important to acknowledge that self-disclosure encompasses a wide range of gender identities and expressions. Future research should explore the unique challenges and opportunities for self-disclosure among transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming educators (Nicolazzo, 2016). Drawing on critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2016), this

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study interrogates the ways in which self-disclosure by LGBTQ+ identifying educators can disrupt heteronormative assumptions, challenge student prejudices and contribute to the creation of more inclusive and equitable educational spaces (Britzman, 2013; Kumashiro, 2002). At the same time, it acknowledges the institutional and social barriers that continue to marginalise and silence LGBTQ+ voices in South African education (Francis, 2022).

Through a critical analysis of personal narratives, reflections and artefacts, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on LGBTQ+-identifying educators' experiences and pedagogical practices in South Africa and beyond (Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). In so doing, it seeks to illuminate the transformative potential of self-disclosure as a pedagogical tool for challenging oppressive norms and fostering social justice in education while also acknowledging the complex negotiations and risks involved in this process.

### Self-disclosure as a pedagogical tool

Self-disclosure, defined as the conscious and deliberate sharing of personal information, experiences, views and responses with others (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008), has been widely recognised as a powerful pedagogical tool that can enhance student engagement, foster trust and build rapport in educational settings (Cayanus, 2004; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). When employed thoughtfully and strategically, educator self-disclosure has the potential to humanise educators, model appropriate disclosure and cultivate a more comfortable and inclusive classroom environment (Miller et al., 2014).

However, the decision to self-disclose is a complex and multifaceted one, particularly for educators who belong to marginalised or stigmatised identity groups, such as those who identify as LGBTQ+ (Holman et al., 2023). For LGBTQ+-identifying educators, the choice to disclose their sexual orientation in the classroom is a high-stake decision fraught with personal and professional risks (Hardie, 2012; Liddle, 1997). The author firstly wishes to clarify the use of two terms, LGBTQ+ and queer in this study. As Jagose (1996) observes, 'queer' has evolved from a pejorative term to an academic concept challenging fixed notions of identity. In this autoethnographic study, 'queer' is employed as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ identities (Callis, 2014) and as a theoretical framework for critiquing heteronormativity in educational settings (Warner, 1993). When referring to queer educators or queer identities, I use the term as a reclaimed, positive self-identifier for individuals outside heteronormative and cisnormative categories. Simultaneously, in discussing queer liberation or queer inclusivity, the author invokes the theoretical and political dimensions of queer theory, which seeks to destabilise normative categories and challenge systems of power (Butler, 2002). This dual usage reflects the complex interplay between personal identity, professional role and theoretical perspective in navigating self-disclosure as an educator. So, queer educators who come out to their

students may face discrimination, harassment and even job loss (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015). They may be subjected to accusations of pushing a 'gay agenda', attempting to recruit students or being sexually predatory (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Wright, 2010). These risks are particularly acute in contexts where heteronormativity and cisnormativity are deeply entrenched and LGBTQ+ identities are marginalised. As a result, many LGBTQ+-identifying educators choose to conceal their sexual identities in the workplace, a decision that can have significant psychological and professional costs. It is important to notice that the decision to disclose or conceal one's LGBTQ+ identity is not always binary. Many educators navigate a middle ground, engaging in what Orne (2011) calls 'strategic outness', where they selectively disclose their identity based on context and perceived risks and benefits. This nuanced approach allows for greater flexibility in navigating heteronormative educational spaces. Despite these challenges, a growing body of research points to the significant pedagogical benefits of LGBTQ+ identifying educator outness. When queer educators disclose their sexual orientation, they have the opportunity to provide students with positive role models, challenge stereotypes about LGBTQ+ identities and prompt critical reflections on heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Martino, 2008; Staley & Leonardi, 2016). Holman et al. (2023) found that educators teaching diversity courses consciously shared aspects of their identity to: (1) promote transparency and reflexivity, (2) increase awareness and visibility of diverse identities, (3) enhance dialogue and (4) challenge biases. These findings illustrate how intentional educator self-disclosure can be a form of critical pedagogy that challenges dominant power structures and ideologies (Freire, 1970). The extent to which LGBTQ+ educators can engage in this transformative work is heavily dependent on the broader social and political contexts in which they operate. As Frizelle (2020) discusses, universities can be spaces where the 'heterosexual matrix is alive and well' (p. 21), regulating sexual and gendered relations in ways that produce 'normative violence' for those who transgress heteronormative expectations (Chambers & Carver, 2008). Within such hostile climates, self-disclosure is an especially risky proposition for LGBTQ+-identifying educators, who may face severe personal and professional consequences for coming out.

At the same time, there are glimmers of hope and resistance within educational landscapes. A small but growing body of research documents the experiences of out queer educators actively challenging the heterosexist status quo in learning institutions (Francis, 2014; Nzimande, 2015). These educators report using their visibility strategically to disrupt heteronormative assumptions, create more inclusive learning spaces and support queer students (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). By embodying alternative ways of being and knowing, they lay the groundwork for a more just and equitable future.

Ultimately, the transformative potential of LGBTQ+-identifying educator outness will depend on the extent to which it is supported by broader movements for social justice and educational equity. As Brockenbrough (2015) notes:

[Q]ueer educators' efforts to create more liberatory and inclusive classrooms are not separate from, but rather deeply connected to, the larger project of dismantling oppressive systems and structures in education and society. (p. 31)

## Critical pedagogy theory

Critical pedagogy, a theoretical framework that emerged from the seminal work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), offers a powerful lens through which to understand the transformative potential of LGBTQ+ educator self-disclosure in educational settings. At its core, critical pedagogy seeks to challenge oppressive power structures and promote social justice through teaching and learning (Giroux, 2016). It emphasises the importance of critical consciousness-raising, empowerment and transformative action in educational practices (McLaren, 2015). One of the key tenets of critical pedagogy is the notion of education as a political act (Freire, 1970). According to this view, teaching and learning are never neutral processes; rather, they are always embedded within specific social, cultural and historical contexts that shape their meaning and impact (Apple, 2004).

Critical pedagogy also recognises that the work of social transformation cannot be carried out by individual educators alone (Freire, 1970). Rather, it requires collective action and solidarity across differences in order to build a more just and equitable society (Darder et al., 2017). In the context of LGBTQ+-identifying educator self-disclosure, this means acknowledging the ways in which the risks and benefits of this practice are shaped by educators' multiple, intersecting identities and the specific contexts in which they work (Few-Demo et al., 2016).

Critical pedagogical lens invites educators, researchers and advocates to approach the question of LGBTQ+ identifying educator self-disclosure with a sense of both urgency and humility. It calls on us to recognise the courageous and transformative work that LGBTQ+-identifying educators are already doing in their classrooms and communities while also acknowledging the systemic barriers and challenges they face. And it challenges us to imagine and enact new forms of solidarity, resistance and possibility in the struggle for queer liberation and educational justice (Mayo, 2014).

## Research methods and design

Through self-reflection and analysis of my personal narratives and artefacts, I explore the transformative potential and challenges of disclosing my sexual orientation in the context of teaching about gender and sexuality.

### Research design

This study employs an autoethnographic research design, a qualitative approach that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). This design is particularly suitable for this study, as it allows me, a gay professor at a

South African university, to critically examine my own experiences of self-disclosure in the classroom and situate these experiences within the broader context of LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion in educational spaces (Drechsler Sharp et al., 2012).

### Participant

In autoethnographic research, the researcher is the primary participant (Chang, 2016). In this study, I as a gay professor at a South African university is the sole participant. My personal experiences, reflections and observations serve as the primary data for the study (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). My journey towards self-disclosure was influenced by several factors, including a supportive university environment and personal growth (Rand et al., 2021). I first came out to selected colleagues before discussing my sexuality with students, a common progression for many LGBTQ+ educators (Palkki, 2016). The decision to wear a shawl during the gender and society discussion in my fourth-year Life Orientation methodology course was intentional, although not explicitly announced beforehand. This choice was part of an ongoing dialogue about gender norms and diversity that had been woven throughout the semester (Cashmere, 2018).

### Data collection and analysis

Data collection in this autoethnographic study involved my self-observation and reflection on my experiences of self-disclosure in the classroom, as well as the collection of relevant artefacts and documents (Chang, 2016). I engaged in a process of critical self-reflection, drawing on my personal memories, journal entries and teaching materials related to specific instances of self-disclosure during my lectures on gender and sexuality (Drechsler Sharp et al., 2012).

One key incident that served as a focus for my documented reflections occurred during a class discussion on gender norms and socialisation. I had worn a shawl, a garment typically associated with women in South African culture, to class. My decision to wear a shawl was a deliberate pedagogical choice. By challenging gender norms through my attire, I aimed to provoke discussion and create an opportunity for critical reflection on gender expression and societal expectations (Cashmere, 2018). This sartorial choice sparked a conversation among students about gendered clothing norms and expectations. These comments served as the basis for my critical reflections on the impact of my self-disclosure on students' perceptions and understanding of LGBTQ+ identities.

The data analysis process involved my iterative engagement with my own experiences and reflections, as well as the identification of key themes and patterns that emerged from the data (Holman Jones et al., 2016). I employed a thematic analysis approach, which involved carefully reading and re-reading his personal reflections coding the data for significant themes and organising these themes into a coherent narrative structure (Ellis et al., 2011).

## Ethical considerations

In autoethnographic research, ethical considerations primarily concern the researcher's self-care and the protection of any individuals who may be implicated in the researcher's personal narratives (Tolich, 2010). In this study, I am the sole participant and the focus of the research is on my own experiences and reflections. This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

## Discussion

Through two interconnected themes, I examine how my own experiences of disclosing my sexual orientation as a gay professor disrupted and challenged students' constructions of gay identities while also humanising queer experiences and fostering a more inclusive learning environment. The discussion highlights the pedagogical power of self-disclosure in promoting queer inclusivity, while also acknowledging the personal and contextual complexities that shape LGBTQ+ educators' decisions around visibility and authenticity in educational settings.

This was in a class where we discussed gender and society. A student wanted to know what I was wearing, and I responded that it was a shawl. The student then asked if shawls were not clothing for women, which sparked a conversation about demarcated clothing for males and females, how that is determined and how it shapes and constructs the binary gender. I then asked if it is for women and I wear it, what the issue is. The student responded that men wearing women's clothes are normally perceived as gay. I followed up with the question of what the issue is with me being gay and various comments were made: that I am too straight-looking, too straight-acting, and that gay men are more feminine, among others. The most outstanding comment was that they had never seen a gay professor.

### Disrupting and transforming students' constructions of gay identities

Self-disclosure by LGBTQ+-identifying educators has the potential to disrupt and transform students' constructions of gay identities, particularly in the South African context where heteronormativity and cisnormativity remain dominant (Msibi, 2019). When I, as a gay professor, chose to disclose my sexual orientation during a class discussion on gender norms, I challenged students' preconceived notions of what it means to be gay in South Africa.

The students' reactions reveal how deeply ingrained societal norms and expectations shape perceptions of LGBTQ+ identities. As Bhana (2014) notes, these views are often the result of limited exposure to diverse LGBTQ+ experiences and the pervasive influence of heteronormative socialisation in South African society. This underscores the importance of challenging these narrow constructions through increased visibility and education. By disclosing my sexual orientation and embodying a gay identity that defies these stereotypes, I

created a 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991) for my students, challenging them to confront and reassess their assumptions about what it means to be gay. This aligns with the concept of 'teaching queerly' (Britzman, 2013), which involves disrupting normative ways of thinking and being in the classroom.

My self-disclosure also provided an opportunity for students to engage in critical reflection and dialogue about the diversity and complexity of LGBTQ+ identities. As Reygan (2019) argues, such discussions are essential for challenging the heteronormative 'hidden curriculum' in South African education settings and promoting more inclusive and affirming educational spaces for all students. Moreover, by sharing my own experiences and perspectives as a gay man, I modelled the importance of authenticity and self-acceptance, which can be particularly impactful for LGBTQ+ students who may be struggling with their own identities (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). As Francis (2022) notes, the presence of visible LGBTQ+ role models in educational settings can contribute to a more positive and supportive school climate for queer youth. This generated a further conversation about whether queer identities could be out in the workplace. As student teachers, they were concerned that if you are out as a gay teacher, the learners in school will not respect you. I followed up with a question of whether they disrespect me. Some responded that they do respect me as a professor and that my teaching is of a high standard and challenges them to think outside of the norm. This brought into question the notion that being gay and professionalism cannot be linked. They explained that being gay is something social, a lifestyle and separate from professional identity. One student said he now looks differently at me and gay people because all the gay people he knows are those who dropped out of school, are attention seekers and work in the retail industry. Another student thought that gayness ends at a particular age because he had not seen older black gay men. This illustrates the intersectionality of queer life in South Africa and the nuanced conversations required.

### Bringing the reality of queerness to the classroom

My self-disclosure also served to bring the reality of queerness into the classroom, humanising LGBTQ+ identities and experiences for students who may have had limited personal exposure to queer individuals. In a heteronormative society, LGBTQ+ identities are often marginalised, stereotyped or rendered invisible (Francis, 2022). This can lead to a lack of understanding and empathy for the lived experiences of queer individuals.

By disclosing my sexual orientation, I made my queerness visible and tangible for my students. This visibility is crucial for challenging the abstract and often negative ways in which LGBTQ+ identities are represented in popular media and discourse (Msibi, 2013). When students are able to interact with a real, complex and multifaceted queer individual, it

becomes more difficult to maintain simplistic or stereotypical views of LGBTQ+ people. Moreover, my self-disclosure created a space for students to ask questions and engage in dialogue about LGBTQ+ experiences. This kind of personal engagement can be transformative for students, as it allows them to develop a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the challenges and joys of queer lives (Meyer, 2007). As hooks (2014) argues, such engaged pedagogy can foster a sense of community and connection in the classroom, breaking down barriers between students and teachers.

These conversations in class clearly had implications for those students who may identify as non-heterosexual. Moreover, it will allow students to be more considerate, because sexuality is not something that you see, and the pervasive markers of sexuality have the potential to inadequately care for and support diverse student identities. As Sears (1999) notes, the decision to come out in the classroom is shaped by a range of factors, including institutional context, personal safety and professional risks. While self-disclosure can be a powerful tool for some educators, it is crucial to recognise that not all LGBTQ+-identifying teachers may feel comfortable or safe in sharing their identities. Educational institutions must provide comprehensive support systems, including anti-discrimination policies, mental health resources and professional development opportunities to ensure that all educators, regardless of their decision to disclose, can thrive in their roles (Jennings, 2015). For teacher-education students who may work with LGBTQ+-identifying learners and communities, it is essential to develop cultural competence and inclusive practices, even if they choose not to disclose their own identities (Clark, 2010). As Kumashiro (2002) argues, creating truly inclusive and transformative educational spaces requires a systemic and multifaceted approach that goes beyond individual acts of self-disclosure.

When LGBTQ+-identifying educators choose to disclose their sexual orientations in the classroom, it can have a profound impact on students' learning and development. As Rofes (2005) argues, queer-identifying educators who are open about their identities can serve as powerful role models and mentors for LGBTQ+ students, providing them with a sense of validation and support that they may not find elsewhere. Moreover, self-disclosure can enhance the authenticity and credibility of LGBTQ+ educators when teaching about sexual and gender diversity. As Mayo (2007) observes, students are more likely to engage with and learn from educators who are perceived as genuine and trustworthy. By sharing their own experiences and perspectives, LGBTQ+-identifying educators can create a more meaningful and impactful learning experience for all students.

In the South African context, where LGBTQ+ identities remain marginalised and stigmatised (Msibi, 2019), the pedagogical power of self-disclosure by queer educators takes on particular significance. Francis (2022) argues the presence of visible and vocal LGBTQ+ educators in South

African schools can challenge the pervasive culture of silence around queer identities and contribute to the transformation of educational spaces. As Francis (2022) observes, queer educators in South Africa may experience discrimination, harassment or even violence as a result of their visibility. It is therefore essential that educational institutions provide support, protection and resources for LGBTQ+ educators who choose to be open about their identities.

Ultimately, the decision to disclose one's sexual orientation in the classroom should remain a personal choice for LGBTQ+ educators. While self-disclosure can be a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting queer inclusivity and transforming students' understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, it should not be seen as a mandatory or expected practice.

## Conclusion

This autoethnographic study has explored the transformative potential and challenges of self-disclosure by LGBTQ+ educators in South African higher education, focusing on my experiences as a gay professor. Through a critical analysis of personal narratives, reflections and artefacts, the study has illuminated the ways in which self-disclosure can disrupt heteronormative assumptions, challenge student prejudices and contribute to the creation of more inclusive and equitable educational spaces.

The findings in this article suggest that self-disclosure by LGBTQ+ educators can be a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering student engagement, promoting critical dialogue and challenging oppressive norms in the classroom. By sharing my own experiences and perspectives as a gay man, I was able to create a space for students to confront their own biases, engage with diverse perspectives and develop a more nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences. Rather, it argues for a more comprehensive and intersectional approach to social justice education, one that recognises the complex ways in which multiple forms of oppression intersect and shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and educators.

Based on these findings, the study offers several tangible recommendations for educators, researchers and policymakers. Firstly, it calls for the development of more inclusive and affirming educational policies and practices that recognise and support the diverse identities and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in South African higher education. This may include the incorporation of LGBTQ+ perspectives and histories into curricula, the provision of sensitisation training for faculty and staff and the creation of safe spaces and support networks for LGBTQ+ students and educators.

Secondly, the study highlights the need for further research on the experiences and pedagogical practices of LGBTQ+ educators in South Africa and beyond. Further research is needed to explore the diverse ways in which LGBTQ+

educators navigate heteronormative and cisnormative educational spaces and to identify best practices for promoting social justice and inclusivity in the classroom.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the transformative potential of self-disclosure by LGBTQ+ educators in South African higher education while also highlighting the complex negotiations and risks involved in this process. It calls for a more comprehensive and intersectional approach to social justice education, one that recognises the systemic nature of oppression and works towards the creation of more inclusive and equitable educational spaces for all individuals. By embracing the power of personal narratives, critical reflection and collective action, we can work towards a future in which all individuals are able to bring their whole selves to the classroom and beyond.

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A.B. declares that they are the sole author of this article.

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### Data availability

All data will be made available upon request.

### Disclaimer

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