

Pride, Prejudice and Persuasion

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The title of this conference is obviously a play on Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, and I'm afraid I have picked up shamelessly on the titles of her two other novels that don't just have a proper name as the title, not just to show that I come from an English teaching background, but because *Pride, Prejudice and Persuasion* are in fact what I want to talk about. I also rather like the notion of building an address on sexuality around Jane Austen, not because I am going to make a revelation that in fact she was lesbian or that there is a gay sub-text in any of the novels, but because there is a nice piquancy in bringing together an author who many, rightly or wrongly, see as the epitome of gentility and manners, with the notion of sexuality.

I actually have a good precedent for doing this. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who some of you will know as one of the founders of Queer Theory, wrote a notorious article entitled "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" (Sedgwick, 1993, pp. 109-129). In fact, she hadn't even written the article, only announced it in a conference program, when the press picked it up and it became a major scandal. It was seen as an example of the ludicrous extremities to which recent theory could go. It is not so much what Sedgwick says in the article that I want to start this talk by considering, but rather the fact that bringing together the two concepts, Jane Austen and masturbation (particularly female masturbation), created such a furore. It shows how much, in public discourse, we compartmentalise. There are those things that we expect to hear talked about, and those that we know about but prefer to have kept silent. Jane Austen is respectable, respected, to talk about her shows signs of education and breeding: masturbating girls are a dirty secret and not to be talked about in polite society.

Let Jane Austen stand for schooling: let the masturbating girl stand for homosexuality.

It is a “dirty secret”, something not to be talked about, that in any classroom in any school you go into, there are statistically likely to be one or two children who are, or who will grow up to identify as “homosexual”. They may be the sissy boy or the girl who is seen as a bit of a tomboy, but they can equally be the footy-playing, macho school hero and the beautiful, feminine blonde he takes to the Year 12 ball, in practice for the day he can take her to the Brownlow dinner and they can have their picture splashed across the papers as he holds up the medal in one hand, and holds her with the other, even though he may be thinking more about the blonde from the opposition team he was playing on last weekend, or his partner at home watching the telecast who he just couldn’t begin to think of bringing to the Brownlow dinner tonight.

And not bringing him was good sense in most ways. You can imagine the media frenzy if James Hird or Nathan Buckley turned up to the Brownlow dinner hand in hand with a male companion. You can imagine the repercussions for the treatment they could expect on the footy field, and you can even imagine the financial repercussions it might have in terms of lost endorsements, appearance fees, etc. The title of this conference is Sense and Sexuality, and in one perspective, if you’re gay, it makes very good sense, in all sorts of ways, to hide your sexuality.

And the reason, of course, is prejudice, one of the terms in the title of my talk. We all know that prejudice is a bad thing, but we all know that it exists and is almost impossible to eradicate entirely, even in ourselves. Why it’s difficult to eradicate is that it is very much an emotional phenomenon, and only in small part an intellectual one, and for that reason, telling ourselves rationally that it’s a bad thing, doesn’t cut much ice if we are feeling that we don’t like a particular kind of person.

We might say that it’s common sense that we shouldn’t discriminate against young same-sex-attracted people, and yet it undoubtedly seems like common sense to some people *to* discriminate. What is common sense is defined by social norms, and if social norms suggest that a particular kind of person or behaviour is aberrant, then it

will seem normal – common sense – to disapprove of them. What we need is not common sense but good sense.

This was brought home to me a year or so ago, with the incident that got into the press about a student teacher who had her internship terminated at a primary school because she had told some of the kids that the woman who came to pick her up after school was her partner. She was given the pseudonym “Jane” in the press. I don’t want to go into the specifics of the incident, but you may remember that some parents complained, and the principal terminated her internship.

Now, one might have hoped that the common sense reaction of the parents when their children came home and told them about their teacher and her partner, would be the good sense one, that they would say “Isn’t it nice that she has someone who cares for her and can pick her up after school?” But that wasn’t what they saw as common sense. Their common sense told them that this was an outrage, having a lesbian teaching their children and actually acknowledging to them that she was lesbian. The masturbating girl had got into the Jane Austen classroom.

What story were they telling themselves? Did they think that their children didn’t know that lesbians existed before, and their innocence had been corrupted? Surely not - lesbian and gay people are everywhere in the media - of course, their children know about them. Did they think that their children had never met a lesbian before? Surely not; they couldn’t be that naïve. Did they think that the teacher was trying to recruit their kids? Did they think that they might become the victims of sexual abuse? Surely not to both.

The danger they felt was undoubtedly something much more fundamental and instinctive. Sexuality is one of the basic areas, like gender and ethnicity, through which we create our identity, through which we define ourselves. In these areas, people are very sensitive to those who don’t conform to the norm. If the norm is right, then those others who are different are wrong, and therefore dangerous. As a group, they can be pre-judged (hence the term “prejudice”).

What the story of Jane also very strikingly demonstrates is the powerful silencing of sexuality in schools. Jane's problem was not that she was lesbian: it was that she allowed it to be talked about. If the question had never come up, or she had simply stayed quiet about it (in the face of considerable taunting from the students, as it happened), then the parents would have had no grounds on which to complain. But it was spoken, and could then not be ignored. It had become public knowledge. In fact, knowledge was a fundamental thing that was at issue. Schools are about sharing knowledge, but only certain kinds of knowledge: this was knowledge that the parents did not want their children to have, the knowledge that homosexual people exist in the real suburban world, that they get picked up after school by their partners, that they are really quite normal. In fact, the sheer normality of homosexuality is what many people can't come at. It seems like a horrible deception that these ordinary looking and acting people in fact are in one way significantly different. It throws into doubt the reliability of the normal.

One of the things you often hear is the view that there is nothing wrong with homosexual people, but they should just keep quiet about it. You hear people saying about how the love that used to "dare not speak its name" can't now shut up. There'd be no problem if gay and lesbian people didn't flaunt their sexuality, or didn't let on. This attitude produces things like the notorious "Don't ask, don't tell" strategy that was Bill Clinton's way of handling the issue of homosexuality in the US Military. In other words, what people are saying is "we don't want to know". It's not so much that people want to suppress homosexual people – that would be gross and intolerant – it's just that they want to suppress *knowledge about* homosexual people. The lives of the general population it seems would be so much more comfortable if they didn't have to acknowledge that homosexual people existed. This wished-for erasure of the existence of lesbian and gay young people is something we will come back to. It gives a strong message that some young people take all too literally, as the suicide statistics attest.

In some ways, the key figure in this whole sorry episode of Jane was the Principal. The parents could have got upset, but the Principal could have (I would say, should have) supported the student teacher. Good sense should have told him that the parents were reacting in an unacceptable way, and that every legal and policy

framework would suggest that there were no grounds for making any move against the student teacher. However, he acted on his common sense understanding that there was something wrong here.

When we went out to talk to him about what he had done, and mention to him the Equal Opportunity Act and what the repercussions might be for him, his first argument was that it was school policy that anyone had to get parental consent if they were going to talk about sex, and the student teacher hadn't done that. He seemed surprised when I pointed out to him that she hadn't been talking about sex at all. She had been talking about relationships.

If Jane had been heterosexual and had said that the guy who picked her up after school was her partner, it would not have been deemed reprehensibly pornographic? If the principal himself mentioned his wife (if he has one), a parent who heard about it wouldn't immediately imagine the disgusting things that went on in their bedroom and have him suspended? Or I certainly hope not.

It is one of the difficulties that lesbians and gay men face, that many people can only think of their relationships in purely sexual terms. There is a public perception, a common sense view that "we all know", that homosexual people are concerned with nothing but sex, and all homosexual sex is bad (neither of which is at all true). Of course, the problem is partly with the term "homosexual", or even same-sex-attracted, since it does highlight "sex", but the simplification of all the complexity of human beings down to the one dimension is something that needs to be guarded against, whether the dimension is race, or gender or social background. There is a great diversity of lesbian and gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, and there is a need to avoid reducing them to a single stereotype.

So, common sense needs to be good common sense, not just subscribing to common social norms if it is going to be much use when it comes to working with the matter of sexuality in schools, supporting queer teachers and students, developing curriculum for all students that is inclusive of lesbian and gay people and perspectives. Schooling needs to work on all these fronts:

- supporting queer teachers
- supporting queer students
- developing anti-discriminatory attitudes towards queer people.

Unless all three are done, our schools are seriously failing.

What can persuade schools to take all this on board seriously, if they haven't already? Why do schools need to take note of these things? The most obvious answer is because they have to. They are subject to the Equal Opportunity Act, and they cannot allow discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. Our Principal really could have been taken to court and there is no way he would have won the case, I think, but Jane decided that she had been through enough, and (sensibly, but rather tragically), she was concerned about the effect it might have on her teaching career, that her name would get around the teaching profession and she just might not be the preferred candidate for any jobs she applied for. (Queer people often self-discriminate for that kind of reason.)

There are very strong policy initiatives within the Department of Education and Training too. It is clear that discrimination will not be tolerated, in compliance with the Equal Opportunity Act, and within curriculum, there is a strongly mandated requirement for sexuality education, which is being underpinned by materials development. Programs are being supported. You will hear about many of these initiatives today. In fact, this conference is an excellent example of the commitment that the Department of Education and Training has to supporting same-sex-attracted young people and working to ensure that they are not discriminated against and in educating school communities about sexual diversity.

So schools are obliged to take account of same-sex-attraction because of policy directives. However, while that is all terrific, it has its limitations if there is no deep desire in the school to help same-sex-attracted kids and teachers and to create a non-discriminatory environment, if the minimum needed is just being done because it *has* to be done. Why should schools *want* to foreground the matter of same-sex-attraction?

One of the obvious answers to that is because they have a duty of care for all students and a responsibility for their positive development. An aspect of teaching that we can forget at times is that it is one of the caring professions, and we as teachers are, partially at least, responsible for the development and well-being of our students. Most of us wouldn't be in teaching if we didn't care for the students, and if we are aware that a certain group of our students are particularly at risk from bullying, are more at risk of suicide, drug abuse, dangerous sexual behaviour, then we will want to do something about it.

Of course, one of the problems is that the queer students are often invisible, and they have every reason not to identify themselves in general within the school. We've already talked about the demand for silence around homosexuality, the lonely silence in which most young queer people live. Some of the available research allows us to see and hear what is going on within that silence, and this research needs to be widely disseminated. Some of the most striking has been done here in Victoria by the Australian Research Centre for Sex Health and Society (ARCSHS) at La Trobe University, particularly in the *Writing Themselves In* (Hillier et al., 1998) and *Writing Themselves in Again* (Hillier, Turner, & Mitchell, 2005) projects.

There will be a presentation by ARCSHS later in the program, and I don't want to steal their thunder, but it is worth mentioning, as a kind of trailer, some of their findings.

A fair bit of research has been done all over the world on youth suicide, and it generally comes up with a figure something like that young same-sex-attracted people are about five times as likely to attempt suicide than young straight people. As I hinted before, the desire of society to obliterate knowledge of young people's sexuality can be taken all too literally by the young people themselves. The La Trobe study gives us some further detail not just about attempted suicide but about self-harm in general. About 35% of the young people in the study had thought about or succeeded in harming themselves, and this was generally in a context of being verbally or physically abused by others (Hillier et al., 2005, p. 46). We'll talk about abuse more in a moment, but the dynamic of people treating them as deserving to have violence visited upon them leading to self-harm is clear.

Abuse from others also heightens the likelihood of the young people indulging in drug use (although there was a marked decrease in drug use between 1998 and 2004, which is very positive), but it's still true that "drug use remains substantially higher than for heterosexual youth, for example over double the number of SSAY (Same Sex Attracted Young People) have injected drugs". (p. 55)

They are also likely to experiment sexually in more risky ways, and the study showed, for example, in comparison with a national study of secondary schools students, 15-18 year olds in the ARCSHS study were five times more likely to have been diagnosed with an STI (p. 34).

So, if we as teachers belong to a caring profession, there is certainly material for us to exercise our care on here. If any clearly distinguishable group in schools were as vulnerable as this group, a lot of attention would be paid to them and support given. As I say, it is largely the invisibility of homosexual young people that allows us not to notice, and so, often, for nothing to be done.

On the other hand, I think we need to keep a sense of balance, and while it is absolutely true that things need to happen in and out of schools because of the health risks that SSAY are vulnerable to, it is also important not to pathologise homosexuality, and see homosexuality itself as the health risk. There is nothing unhealthy about homosexuality: the disease is in the way that young lesbians and gay men are treated. Prejudice is a health issue. One of the significant findings of the La Trobe study, although one that will surprise no-one I'm sure, is that all of these negative outcomes were exacerbated by abuse. In the 2004 survey, 44% of the respondents said that they had been verbally abused because of their sexuality, and 15% had been physically abused (p. 37). It's not easy being gay. Particularly worrying for our purposes, is that 74%, almost three-quarters of those who reported abuse, said that incidents had happened at school (p. 39). Now, in one way this isn't surprising – kids spend a lot of time at school and it's a heavily populated public environment – but even so, it shows the need for more general anti-discriminatory education, and greater vigilance in protecting SSAY. One of the telling quotations from the report is

Although I've had many experiences, I'll just say this: The fact that homophobia is "illegal" in schools means SQUAT! The second the teacher's back is turned all hell breaks loose.

(Dean, 18 years, p. 40)

This suggests the need for raising whole school awareness. It is not just a matter of policy, but of teaching anti-oppressive understandings within the curriculum, of persuading the whole school that it is perfectly normal and acceptable for people to be attracted to others of the same sex.

If schools have a responsibility to implement policy, and there is also a duty and a desire to care for the well-being of students, beyond that I believe that schools have a responsibility to the community in terms of ethical education. We should be educating with the aim of producing a just and humane society in which people of all kinds are treated fairly and without discrimination.

There is a balance to be struck here. Schools reflect community attitudes: quite clearly in our story of Jane, the actions of the school were in accord with the attitudes of at least one section of the school community, and the principal undoubtedly thought that what he did was what the community would expect. But schools also shape community attitudes, most notably through educating students, but also by subscribing in what they do to the values that they are aiming to teach. So there was a real failure in education of the community in that incident.

The students who come into school usually come with the attitudes of the community: in that way schools are a microcosm. However, students are often also interested in questioning community attitudes, and so schools have a significant role to play in fostering critical analysis of common social beliefs. This can be done in many places across the curriculum, in English classes, in Humanities classes, and now of course, with the Physical, Personal and Social Learning strand in VELs, there is a very prominent arena for students to develop a critical awareness of themselves, their development and their place in the community and society. I am not saying for a moment that sexuality should be the focal point of all these areas, but I am saying that

sexuality, including non-heterosexual sexuality is too significant not to have its place in them as one of many persisting themes. There are certainly lots of resources around that can support this already, and more and more are being developed. And it's not only in those subjects, but right across the curriculum that there needs to be an acknowledgment of the existence of same-sex-attracted people, through not obliterating their past (e.g. their persecution throughout much of history - it wasn't only Jews in Nazi concentration camps, you know), through acknowledging their contribution in many fields, and just by using an example here or there in a Maths class or an economics class that *doesn't* assume that the world is heterosexual. It is the assumption of heterosexuality that is often so damaging, the assumption that the whole world is heterosexual and same-sex-attracted people don't exist (certainly have no right to exist).

And it's important that we get beyond seeing sexuality as an issue. I was saying before how we need not to pathologise homosexuality: I think it is equally important not to turn it into a problem. This can happen very easily in subjects like English or SOSE, where teachers are always on the lookout for "issues" to discuss. Homosexuality is often a hot issue, lots of public statements, letters to the paper, etc. But, I would insist, homosexuality is not the problem. If the Federal Government blocks same-sex marriages in the ACT, the Howard Government is the problem, the failure to follow through anti-discriminatory principles is the problem, the way that people make a problem of homosexuality is the problem, but there is no problem with homosexuality or homosexual people themselves.

I want homosexuality to be ordinary: this is why it's important that it be talked about right across the curriculum. As we have seen, the silence around it is especially damaging. The process that I hope will happen of its emergence into speech in schools will be seen and complained about as "people always going on about homosexuals these days". If you think that homosexuality should not be allowed into speech - that silence is the only appropriate way of dealing with it - then any talk about it is going to be too much talk. A single statement will be excessive.

But one hopes there will come a time when it is just normal to talk about homosexuality. It will have become one of those things in the domain of the every

day (as indeed it is if only people were conscious of the silenced homosexuality around them). There will be nothing strange, no-one will see any problem with their children having an openly lesbian teacher, or the school captain footy hero bringing his boyfriend to the Year 12 ball, or even to the Brownlow dinner.

I'm dreaming, of course - there's a long way to go - but that path of making homosexuality ordinary is the path that we have to go down.

Why? Because same-sex-attracted young people are worth it. They don't deserve to be suppressed into lonely and unhappy silence. They are too valuable a resource to our society to be forced to leave school because they can't stand the bullying, What they see from their different perspectives is too important to be lost.

One of the most pleasing features of the La Trobe study is that in 2004, 76% of the young people said that they felt "great" or "pretty good" about their sexuality. This was up from 60% six years ago. (p. 19) There might be all sorts of reasons for this, but it is a sure indication that things are changing, and changing for the better. Maybe my dream is not so much a dream as one would have thought.

These are young people who take pride in their sexuality, and are not beaten down. As I keep saying, *they* are not the problem. They are the hope. This reminded me of some comments made by a group of gay students in the early nineties from Mairtin Mac an Ghaill's book, *The Making of Men*, that I've quoted elsewhere (Misson, 1995), but let me quote them again,

Rajinder: Teachers, especially male teachers, assume your being gay is a problem but there are a lot of plusses. In fact, I think that one of the main reasons that male straights hate us is because they really know that emotionally we are more worked out than them. We can talk about and express our feelings, our emotions in a positive way....

Peter: If you are an outsider in this society, you see things more clearly. You see those who are prejudiced against you but they don't see you. We can't take things for granted. We can stand back, become more observant, more

critical. Not all gays do, of course, but there is more of a possibility that you will than straights...

Joseph: I think that as a group gay people can feel very proud.

(Mac an Ghail, 1994, p. 167)

I think so too. What they say seems to me to be actually very good sense.

We need to use every means of persuasion we have to work towards overcoming prejudice, so that the pride of people like these three young men can flourish.

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