Case Study: Gay Affirmative or Gay Negative?

Lesson Objectives:
• Students will review various forms of intolerance directed at lesbian and gay people and ways that intolerance can be challenged.
• Students will reflect on filmmaking techniques.
• Students will recognize the power of words, images, and sounds to influence a target audience.

Vocabulary:
coming out of the closet, sexual orientation, diversity training, Gay Straight Alliance, homophobia

Media:


Materials Needed:
• Six-page Teacher Guide
• Four video clips
• Student worksheet

Time: 50 minutes

Lesson Procedures:
1. Present the Lesson Introduction to the class.
2. Distribute the student worksheet for logging the clips.
3. Play the video clips while students log their answers.
4. Lead students through a decoding of the video clips using the Media Sample Questions and Answers. The Teacher Guide includes Possible Answers to model application of key knowledge through evidence-based analysis. For more information on leading a decoding lesson, see the Kit Introduction.
5. Discuss the power of words, images, and sounds to communicate messages using Further Questions.
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1. Organize and make copies for the class activities.
2. Introduce the lesson:

Lesson Introduction

This lesson will focus on film and video representations of young people as they deal with the realities of the LGBT experience in an often homophobic society. These excerpts date from the late 1990s, when TV began to air programs having to do with the experiences of homosexual teenagers. Prior to the 1990s, gay and lesbian experiences were often absent from television, as recounted in professor Stephen Tropiano’s book, *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV*. In his “Prime Time Closet Chronology,” he notes that the earliest presentations of homosexuality on TV were documentaries and news specials with titles like “Homosexuals and the Problems They Present” and “The Rejected” (ix). Beginning in the 1970s, adult gay and lesbian characters began to appear in sitcoms and dramatic series. The 1980s and ’90s saw the debut of gay teens on TV with programs like the made-for-TV film *The Truth About Alex* and the series *My So-Called Life*.

Although some people applauded the coming-out of lesbian and gay characters on TV, others criticized the medium. The 1977 comedy series *Soap*, which scripted actor Billy Crystal in a leading role as a gay man, was criticized by various Christian groups, who argued that gay characters had no place on TV. Gay activist groups like the National Gay Task Force criticized the show for reinforcing negative stereotypes of gay men as being unwilling to stand up to homophobic comments (Nugent).

One of the most controversial areas relating to gay-supportive television programming had to do with children’s programs. The Reverend Jerry Falwell suggested that the *Teletubbies* character Tinky Winky was an inappropriate gay role model (“Gay Tinky Winky”) and the Secretary of Education criticized a PBS children’s program for showing lesbian mothers in a positive light (“PBS Censors”). Others argued that positive gay television characters were one way to challenge and change a society with a history of homophobia. As you view these clips, note both the messages about LGBT experience and the ways in which the filmmaker constructs the film to encourage empathy for its characters.

3. Distribute the student worksheets. Have students work individually or in pairs to log each film.
4. Read aloud the brief introductory excerpt before playing each film clip.
5. Play the film clip.
6. Have students write their answers on their worksheet after the showing of the clip.
7. Lead a discussion of the clips using the Possible Answers as a guide to potential student responses.
This excerpt is from the 2009 documentary film *Out in the Silence*, directed by Joe Wilson and Dean Hamer. The film traces events in Wilson’s home town, Oil City, Pennsylvania, following the announcement in the Oil City newspaper of his wedding to his male partner Dean Hamer. Following the announcement, Wilson receives a letter from the mother of CJ, an Oil City high school student who had been harassed after coming out. Wilson returned to Oil City to meet CJ, his mom, and members of the community who oppose gay marriage. According to the film’s Web page, “The aim of *Out in the Silence* is to expand public awareness about the difficulties that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people face in rural and small town America and to promote dialogue and action that will help people on all sides of the issues find common ground” (“Out in the Silence”). The excerpt you will see occurs midway through the film when the filmmakers introduce CJ and his mother to another young man and his family.

**Media Sample Questions & Answers**

1) **What forms of intolerance against lesbian and gay people are presented? Give evidence to support your answer.**

   **Possible Answer:** The clip shows gay bashing and socialized hatred (Ronald Dahle’s testimony), verbal and physical harassment at school (newspaper article), and the failure of friends to oppose intolerance (CJ and Tim’s comments).

2) **What are the ways challenges to intolerance are portrayed in the clip?**

   **Possible Answer:** Intolerance is challenged through personal acts of intervention (CJ – “me standing up for one kid”), coming out (Tim and CJ), filing a law suit challenging the school to stop harassment (Tim’s parents), unlearning hatred and learning unconditional love (Ronald), speaking out publicly (Tim’s parents and CJ’s mom), making a film (filmmakers), and court-mandated diversity training on sexual orientation.

3) **Who is the target audience for this clip?**

   **Possible Answer:** This film targets audiences interested in documentary films and the gay rights movement.

4) **What techniques does the filmmaker use to capture the interest of the target audience?**

   **Possible Answer:** The filmmakers tell the story by arranging for Tim, CJ, and their parents to meet on film to discuss the similarities in their experiences. This choice enabled powerful testimony from Tim’s dad and interaction between Tim and CJ that personalized the experience for the viewer. The cuts to the newspaper articles illustrate the ways courageous personal choices resulted in public controversy and a social movement toward greater community tolerance.
Degrassi: The Next Generation
CTV, 2003

This excerpt is from a 2003 episode of Degrassi: The Next Generation called “Pride”. The Canadian series has been very popular internationally and is show in the U.S. on Teen Nick. The excerpt you will see begins with the character Marco, who has been beaten up by a group of young men because he is gay. The primary conversation you will see is between Marco and Spinner, to whom he had recently come out.

Media Sample Questions & Answers

1) What forms of intolerance against lesbian and gay people are presented? Give evidence to support your answer.

Possible Answer: The clip shows gay bashing, verbal harassment (“Hey Marco, I always knew you and Ben were meant for each other”), outing (Spinner telling Marco’s secret), anti-gay graffiti, and being told to “stop being gay” and to act straight.

2) What are the ways challenges to intolerance are portrayed in the clip?

Possible Answer: Marco initially takes the risk to tell Spinner his secret and then challenges Spinner, saying Spinner’s failure to respect his friend’s confidence make him a gay hater like the men who beat him up.

3) Who is the target audience for this clip?

Possible Answer: The TV show targets a teen audience.

4) What techniques does the filmmaker use to capture the interest of the target audience?

Possible Answer: The filmmakers make the story more credible by setting the clip in a school restroom, a place of privacy. The actors appear to be young like the audience they appeal to. By isolating the two characters in this scene, the filmmakers accentuate the personal risk, betrayal, and injury implicit when friends disclose secrets in safe and unsafe ways.
**Out of the Past**

PBS, 1998

This excerpt is from the 1998 documentary film *Out of the Past*, directed by Jeffrey Dupre. The film explores the history of lesbians and gay men in the U.S. by interweaving stories of LGBT history with the personal journey of Kelli Peterson, a Utah teenager who founded a Gay-Straight Alliance club at her school in 1996. The excerpt you will see begins with Kelli talking about her early experiences coming to terms with her sexual identity as a high school student.

### Media Sample Questions & Answers

1) **What forms of intolerance against lesbian and gay people are presented?** Give evidence to support your answer.

   **Possible Answer:** The clip portraits homophobia via comments about homosexuality as “gross,” “sick,” “perversion,” and “destroying families,” and the State Senate’s consideration of laws to prevent student-organized Gay-Straight Alliance clubs.

2) **What are the ways challenges to intolerance are portrayed in the clip?**

   **Possible Answer:** Intolerance is challenged through education (*Gay Book of Days*), organized support (Gay-Straight Alliance), coming out (telling parents and dating), public pronouncements (students speaking on TV), and federal statutes protecting student rights to organize.

3) **Who is the target audience for this clip?**

   **Possible Answer:** The film targets audiences interested in documentary film, history, and the gay rights movement.

4) **What techniques does the filmmaker use to capture the interest of the target audience?**

   **Possible Answer:** The filmmakers tell the story by intercutting interviews and films of Kelli Peterson and the Gay-Straight Alliance club with televised news footage of the subsequent public controversy in Utah. This skillful interplay of archival footage and the recollections of a youth leader in the movement make this story much more interesting to viewers than would have been possible with voiceover narration about the club accompanied by still photos.
This excerpt is from a 2005 episode called “Sugartime!” that was filmed for the PBS children’s series Postcards From Buster. The episode follows the adventure of the title character as he travels to Vermont during maple sugar season. This particular episode received public attention when the Washington Post published an article, “PBS’s ‘Buster’ Gets An Education.” The article describes a letter sent by then-Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, to PBS officials urging them not to air the episode on the grounds that “many parents would not want their young children exposed to the life-styles portrayed in this episode” (de Moraes). PBS administrators decided not to broadcast the program nationally. However, WGBH (the producer of the series) and a number of other PBS affiliates chose to air the episode. Brigid Sullivan, WGBH’s vice president of children’s programming, defended the program by saying the series was intended to “avoid stereotypical images of all kinds and show modern multi-ethnic/lingual/cultural families and children” (Ibid).

**Media Sample Questions & Answers**

1) What forms of intolerance against lesbian and gay people are presented? Give evidence to support your answer.

**Possible Answer:** No intolerance is directly depicted in this clip, though Buster’s comment, “that’s a lot of moms,” references some people’s difficulty with the idea of “My Two Moms.”

2) What are the ways challenges to intolerance are portrayed in the clip?

**Possible Answer:** Intolerance is challenged by Buster’s parents’ choice to have him spend the day with Gillian, Karen, and their children, making it clear that lesbians are not “dangerous.” Intolerance is also challenged with Emma’s desire to show Buster photos of “my mom and Gillian, people I love a lot.”

3) Who is the target audience for this clip?

**Possible Answer:** This TV show targets children who watch TV.

4) What techniques does the filmmaker use to capture the interest of the target audience?

**Possible Answer:** The filmmakers tell the story by interspersing animation with live action and camera-view shots, engaging interest with varied points of view. By scripting the interaction between Buster and Emma and by setting the camera at a child’s height, the filmmakers allows young viewers to imagine themselves as participants in this conversation. The focus on pet dogs and frogs is also likely to inspire identification from young viewers who may themselves have and like pets.
FURTHER QUESTIONS

- Consider the media controversies over Tim Dahle’s lawsuit in *Out in the Silence*, Kelli Peterson’s Gay-Straight Alliance club in *Out of the Past*, and the representation of lesbian mothering in *Postcards from Buster*. **Discuss the role of the media as a means of furthering social change by stimulating controversy.**

- **Which of these controversies had you known about before? What is the role of the media in affirming or denying the existence of LGBT people?**

- **Who is omitted from our understanding of history and why?**

- **Discuss the extent knowing about injustice contributes to acting against injustice.**

- **Discuss the common values that link these four clips.**

- **Discuss the meaning of “safety” or “sanctuary” for LGBT youth.**

- **Three of these films were shown on Public Broadcasting Stations (PBS) rather than on cable or network TV. Why might this be? Should programs like this be available on a wider range of channels? Why or why not?**

- **Compare the differences in filmmaking techniques between documentary film (*Out in the Silence* and *Out of the Past*) and youth-centered television programs (*Degrassi* and *Postcards from Buster*).**

- **What stereotypes were perpetuated and what stereotypes were challenged in these films?**

- **How might people with different perspectives on lesbian and gay rights view these films differently?**

CONNECTIONS

U1 #3, 16, 17, 18; U2 #9, 13, 14; U3 #10; U4 #2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 14, 17, 18; U5 #5, 6, 10, 12-14, 16, 19, 23; U6 #3, 4, 6, 16; U7 #3, 8, 10, 14, 15; U8 #6, 8-10; U2 L3; U5 L2; U7 L2  
(Dueling Perspectives)

U1 #2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 16, 20; U2 #3, 10, 12, 14, 16; U3 #2, 13, 16, 17, 21; U4 #2, 6, 10, 14, 16-18; U5 #3-11; 17-23; U6 #2, 4, 5, 9, 13, 16; U7 #2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 11-16; U8 #13-15; U2 L3; U4 L2, U4 L3; U5 L2 U5 L3; U6 L3; U7 L2, U7 L3; U8 L3  
(Identity)

U1 #10, 11, 16; U2 #14, 17; U3 #16; U4 #3, 5; U5 #8, 11, 20, 21; U6 #9; U7 #16; U8 #13, 16; U1 L2; U2 L2; U4 L2, U4 L3; U5 L2, U5 L3; U7 L2, U7 L3  
(Youth Audience)

U1 #7-9, 12, 14-18, 20; U2 #6-8, 14, 15, 18; U3 #10, 15, 18, 20, 21; U4 #2, 3, 5-14, 16, 17; U5 #7, 8, 16; U6 #7, 10, 15; U7 #4; U1 L2, U1 L3; U2 L2, U2 L3; U3, L2, U3 L3; U4 L2, U4 L3; U7 L2  
(Civil Disobedience & Direct Action)
Title of Film Clip: ____________________________________________

1) What forms of intolerance against lesbian and gay people are presented? Give evidence to support your answer.

2) What are the ways challenges to intolerance are portrayed in the clip?

3) Who is the target audience for this clip?

4) What techniques does the filmmaker use to capture the interest of the target audience?