

A Gay Man Studies Classics at BYU: Lessons in Inclusive Pedagogy

This year's CAMWS meeting was originally scheduled to be held at the invitation of Brigham Young University, a decision which drew immediate and understandable criticism in view of the school's policies regarding LGBTQIA+ students. Given the controversy, I would like to offer my own experience as a gay Classics student at BYU. This mixture of positive and negative experiences can, I believe, prove illustrative to what instructors of Classics can do, both at religious and secular institutions, to create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ students in our classrooms.

For many students, higher education provides space to explore sexual orientations and gender identities with more freedom and safety than in secondary education. Critically, there is a much higher chance of learning about topic relating to LGBT history and issues which are frequently contested in secondary education—only about 1 in 5 students reported that their education included positive representations of LGBTQ individuals, history, or events (Kosciw, Clark, Truong, and Zongrone, 2020). And with an increasing number of pushes to ban discussion of LGBT issues in schools, the experience of LGBTQ students at university is even more crucial to form and explore their identities, as for many, it is their first chance to do so. Yet an institution's climate has a major effect on these opportunities (Renn, 2017), and BYU's climate has been historically unwelcoming to LGBTQ students. My experience as a Classics student mitigated some of the negative aspects of BYU's climate, but heightened others.

On the one hand, as a closeted gay student, the Classics Studies program, faculty and particularly fellow students created spaces in which I felt comparatively safe to come to terms with my sexual identity. It was to a fellow student in my Greek and Latin classes I first came out.

It was on a study abroad in Greece that I first told more than my two or three closest friends I was gay and found myself welcomed. Once I was out, a professor in the department checked up with me after LDS church officials made harmful statements.

Yet, even when the will to be inclusive was present, the means to do so were often lacking, as is too frequently the case (Prescott, 2019). My coursework danced around taboo subjects. The only time I ever encountered Greek or Roman comedy was as a TA for a visiting professor who was not a member of the LDS church. That same experience was also my first and only exposure to Plato's *Symposium*, and one of the few times a class ever directly touched on sexuality at all, let alone homosexuality. The only time I encountered Sappho was in a class not taught by a Classical Studies faculty, but a prominent faculty member in a different department, who made sure to assure us that Sappho's poetry "wasn't really gay, just conforming to the lyric genre." The same professor argued to the class that "Patroclus and Achilles were only first interpreted as gay centuries later." Such erasures of homosexuality from the ancient world are not only harmful in and of themselves, but they can create a snowball effect of misrepresentation. As Donna Zuckerberg has noted, "Even the most elementary errors still leverage the ancient world to promote reactionary ideas about gender and race" (Zuckerberg, 2018), and these reactionary ideas can spiral into hate and bigotry.

While my own personal experience can only be anecdotal, I feel that by examining the ways Classics at BYU failed me and the ways it did not, we can see some principals that will help us make our curricula more inclusive and welcoming to diverse students. While my experience will focus on LGBTQIA+ issues, and more particularly issues regarding sexual orientation, as those are the ones with which I have personal experience, we should keep in mind how (non)inclusive pedagogies affect students with minority gender identities, and other groups

who are also often excluded from our discipline, such as BIPOC students, first-gen students, foreign students, and so on. Hopefully such an examination will help us as instructors assess how we approach issues that, for many students, are all too real and present.

Bibliography

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