

Forming a Safe Space for LGBTQ Students at My School



From September 2017 to June 2018, one or more members of the Knowles Teacher Initiative community will write a blog post each month exploring the role of small victories, mistakes and failures in their growth and learning. In this post, Teaching Fellow Anthony Tedaldi shares some of the steps he's taken to make his classroom and school a safe space for LGBTQ students.

It took three years of me teaching at the same high school before I faced these facts—I am a gay teacher and I represent a member of the LGBTQ community.

When I first got my job I was incredibly excited. I wanted to be a teacher ever since I was six years old. That's the story I constantly tell and I'm always going to stick to it. And it was weird to me, with all this excitement, that during my first couple of weeks of working at my new school, I was nervous to let out the big secret—that I am a gay man. I'm originally from New York City, which has a different atmosphere than Michigan, where I teach. I had come to realize and understand the conservative values of the friends I have made in Michigan. This notion had trickled on down to the small town in which I currently teach. And these ideas had brought about fear and anxiety I had never thought I would experience.

I would teach with my normal level of excitement and enthusiasm but I would keep a bit of me hidden. And for me, that's a big deal because my life's an open book that screams at you. Growing up in my family and circle of friends, being "fake" is not part of the daily agenda. In the beginning of my career, I would try to chat with coworkers and joke around and smile but there was a hidden boundary and I tried to keep it very professional. I had also heard that our superintendent at the time had strict conservative and moral values and had a negative opinion of the LGBTQ community; he even refused to allow a Gay-Straight Alliance to be created at the school. All of these issues were leading to what could be a disastrous time and I did not want that to happen.

After having more conversations with my co-workers that allowed me to feel comfortable about my teaching skills, I started sharing the fact that I have a boyfriend and am part of the gay community. It was no shock to any of my co-workers. People have often correctly assumed that I am a homosexual because I do possess some flamboyant and energetic qualities that are typically not associated with heterosexual males—but those assumptions are grounded in stereotypes about gender norms, which could be a whole separate article. At the same time, I found out about some other co-workers who were part of this community and decided to just let it all out.

One day during class, a student asked me if I had ever had a girlfriend and my initial quick witted response was, "Eww, ugh oh God no."

To which this student, looking confused, then followed with the question:

"Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

To which I calmly responded, "Yes," and that led to open dialogue and conversation with my students.

Not only did I feel better about myself and sharing a huge part of who I am, I feel like it opened up boundaries with some of my students and allowed them to trust in me with certain personal information. Over the course of the next year or so, I had students approach me for help and guidance and that led me to thinking that I was doing a grave disservice to not be of some sort of support for the LGBTQ community. But where should I start?

Some answers to a big question like that came during the 2017 Knowles Summer

Meeting, when some of the members of the LGBTQ community within Knowles met. The talk was incredibly productive and also heartfelt. I am not usually part of conversations about how we can support each other and bring awareness to our community. Many times during the meeting, I acknowledged and referenced my ignorance when it came to such issues. Growing up in New York, where the LGBTQ community is free to be whoever they want to be, and where my parents and friends did not care, I was spoiled and blind to the fact that this is NOT the situation for everyone. Having the conversation at summer meeting as to what we could do for Knowles got me thinking about what I could and should do for the students at my high school.

Leaving the meeting, I took three actions to provide support for LGBTQ students at my school.

First—it started with being OUT from the beginning.

I knew in order to promote and support members of the LGBTQ community, I had to show that I was proud of who I am and that it's as normal as liking vanilla ice cream. I made sure to purchase a rainbow flag that I posted in my classroom. During my first day of school activity, students had to use artifacts I posted around the room to learn more about me. Some students picked up on the rainbow flag and identified me as being gay and I quickly and calmly said, "Yes," like it was normal. This set the tone from day one.

Some students were shocked that I was so calm and happy about it and others were relieved and felt comfortable. I started to see students truly being themselves and being proud of their interests and who they are. In the beginning, it looked like my classroom would be an open and caring place.

I would reference my homosexuality to make a joke and also use it as an example of my own struggles to make a point. Students do not question the point that you make when you talk about how hard it is to be a gay man, especially a gay boy in high school. It makes for great evidence in anecdotal talks.

I was hoping that if I model how comfortable I am with who I am and my interests in this world that students could feel that they could do the same.

Next, I launched a "Safe Space."

Through those summer meeting conversations, I heard about the idea of a safe space and decided to implement it in my classroom. I printed out signs, colored them and posted them on my door. I also opened the invitation to all of the staff at my school by sending out the following email:

Hello Fellow Co-Workers,

*This year I included on both sides of my door a “Safe Space” poster (print-out) to convey and promote that my classroom is a Safe Space and “**respects all aspects of people:** including ability, age, class, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, immigration status, race, religion, and sexual orientation.”*

I have attached a Word Document in order to share with you the Safe Space sign and that definition. Mine did not come colored, but the triangle is supposed to be pink and the outlined circle is supposed to be green. There is also a space at the bottom where you can customize and edit to put your name for your classroom.

If you would like me to color it for you and leave it in your mailbox, I can do that as well if that would make it easier.

If there are other ways in which you have made your classroom a Safe Space, or a comforting environment, please share that! I am looking for ways to promote safety in my classroom and hopefully have this trickle into our hallways with newly emerging clubs.

Hope you all have an amazing Tuesday!

Sending this kind of email can be nerve-wracking, because co-workers can take offense to any type of suggestion colleagues make about their classrooms. When you start talking to colleagues about their classroom and their lessons, you quickly realize that many people are very sensitive about their teaching. This is why my wording had to be very careful and intentional. I even opened up the

question to co-workers to see what they do in their classroom. I was happy to get a couple of responses from teachers who loved the idea and actually wanted a copy of the "Safe Space" sign on their door. I also printed out copies and gave them to the teachers in the science department. Most of the science teachers put the signs on their door. Some teachers claimed they don't need a sign to promote a safe space and that's their prerogative. I tried to make it clear that seeing the sign could be an invitation for a student to approach a teacher if there's a question or concern, even if they don't know them, which was my intention for this effort.

I haven't had to reference the Safe Space sign too much because students seem to feel comfortable with who they are and ask me questions about things without consequence. One example of when I had to bring it up was when a student was mocking another student that he didn't like for no other reason than he was "weird." After class, I snagged the student who was doing the mocking and we had a calm, yet serious chat. In this chat, I spoke of it how when I was younger, how my classmates used to make fun of me and the way that I spoke because they thought I was different or weird. I told the student that I would go home upset and wonder what was different about me, and how I felt so alone and just wished that I could be normal. I shared that there were times that I wished I didn't exist and times that I felt a desire to do harm to myself; this was all because one student made fun of me. By this point, the student was quite shocked. I redirected him to the Safe Space sign and informed him that I wouldn't wish those feelings of not wanting to exist and feeling alone because I was so different on my worst enemy. I told him that I care for all my students and if I wouldn't even wish those feelings on my worst enemy, I would rather drink acid than have one of my students experience that feeling. This is why I have the Safe Space sign. This conversation was quite powerful and I have not had any issues with the student making fun of the other "weird" student, at least not in my classroom.

Finally, I advocated for the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at my school.

I was approached by several students to run a GSA club. At my school, extracurricular clubs have to be student-led. I think because of my openness about being gay and being comfortable with who I am, and my creation of a Safe Space in my classroom, students felt comfortable enough to want to create such a club and they knew who to go to be the advisor

Starting a GSA would make history at my school. My high school has never had a GSA. The idea was frowned upon and backlash from the community has been feared for years. But these students chose the right advisor because I will fight anyone if they think this club is not going to exist and flourish.

The process for organizing and generating a proposal for this club has been quite interesting. Administration did not know how to speak to me on launching such a club. Although they were very excited for it to happen, they are worried about some things. But I do have to count myself lucky: the administration recognizes that the high school has a large number of students in the LGBTQ community and their conjecture is some of the out-of-school suspended students may be members of this community who don't know how to interact with teachers or their peers when it comes to their sexuality or their gender identity. This is a professional and proactive way to see the positive influence that this club could have. Not only will I help students be self-aware and give a voice to our community, I hope to also provide a pathway for students to act and react to teachers and peers.

Week one of the GSA is going to start soon and I am anxious to see what great and powerful things our club can do to our school and essentially our community. Our club is open to everyone, not just members of the LGBTQ community. I would love to have meetings where allies could learn how to be allies and become informed members of society. I also hope we can put our community on the map and make being LGBTQT as normal as being an athlete at our school.

This process has actually been 23 years in the making, because I hadn't realized my bigger purpose in being a teacher until now—to help those who may not be able to help themselves, to make students proud and aware of who they are, and to ensure they know that they are NOT alone.