THE “GO-TO GUY”

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ABSTRACT

The question came unexpectedly one day as I waited to use the copy machine: “Dr. Xxxxx, I’ve been meaning to ask you, ‘How do you teach music if you are gay?’” This unexpected question momentarily stymied me, and I think I answered, “Well, the same way anyone teaches music.” In the time since then, I wondered if my answer was a good one in light of things I’ve learned as a generally out faculty member with a “safe place” [accepting to all persons, regardless of preference] sticker on my office door.

Two broad and different types of questions or issues will be outlined in this presentation, with scenarios, accompanying caveats, and possible solutions. First, the “Go-to Guy”-or gal-usually an out faculty member—could well feel secure answering questions about being LBGT in the music teaching world. Teaching questions are probably fairly predictable; they are ones Mr. or Ms. “Go-to” may have faced themselves. On the other hand, context—or student-specific issues about being LGBT may lie outside his or her expertise. At that point, faculty must know where the “line” is; that is, they should know when to refer students elsewhere, especially should there be any type of crisis involved in coming out, maintaining relationships, and health issues to name just three. The role of the supportive “Go-to” faculty member in the latter circumstance may be to act as a “referral service” to campus LGBT organizations, counseling services, and health services, or to guide the inquirer to student life or housing officials. General guidelines for faculty and student relationships will be outlined, so that the faculty member remains objective and detached from anything that may be deemed inappropriate while remaining available to all.
THE “GO-TO GUY”

This paper starts out the way my abstract did, with a scenario: The question came unexpectedly from a student one day as I waited to use the copy machine: “Dr. Duling, I’ve been meaning to ask you, ‘How do you teach music if you are gay?’” This surprising query momentarily stymied me, and I think I answered, “Well, the same way anyone teaches music.” In the time since then, with that student teaching successfully in a well-appointed suburb, I have often wondered if my answer was a good one in light of things I’ve learned as a generally “out” faculty member with a “safe place” [accepting to all persons, regardless of preference] sticker on my office door.

This presentation is definitely on the practical side—though I’d like to think that it’s not devoid of philosophical anchors. Two broad and different types of questions or issues will be outlined with scenarios, accompanying caveats, and possible solutions. The scenarios are not totally fictional, though there are fictional elements. I have tried to cover several situations in various contexts from the wealthy suburb to the cornfields of Podunk. First, the “Go-to Guy”—or gal—usually an out faculty member—could well feel secure answering questions about being LGBT in the music teaching world. “Teaching-while-gay” questions are probably fairly predictable; they are ones Mr. or Ms. “Go-to” may have faced themselves. On the other hand, the second possibility is that context- or student-specific concerns about being LGBT may lie outside his or her expertise. At that point, faculty must know where the “line” is; that is, they should know when to refer students elsewhere, especially should there be any type of continuing crisis involved in coming out, maintaining relationships, and health issues, to name just three.

I am going to present five scenarios where the go-to faculty member is approached by a student with “issues” (as our younger brothers and sisters say). Some of the scenarios are also situations in which the faculty member encounters a student or former student outside or after the school setting. I will then ask one or more questions and tell you what I did and, in some cases, what I wish I had done or said. I read the instructions for presentation too late to be able to speak solely from the Power Point slide, so the slides are more rudimentary—as I think they should be anyway.

Scenario I: The Question

Scenario I is the question with which I opened this talk. As before, I thought well enough on my feet to come up with what I believe is the basic answer I’d give about how anyone of any sexual preference, race, religion, or national origin teaches music: you apply everything you know about music and teaching in leading young people to our art. What more might I have said? I wish I’d have said, “and
this is what you do if your elementary or secondary students ask about your sexuality,” but I didn’t exactly know what to say at that point. Since, a close friend my age has said when it comes up, “well, if your parents want to discuss that with me, they can meet with me and the principal and we’ll talk.” When I asked what would happen if such a meeting occurred, he said, “I’d be sure I had not only the principal, but possibly a union representative there, and I’d tell them, ‘I have been employed for over thirty years in this district to teach music, and that’s what I do; nothing about my personal life is anyone’s business.’” He went on to say that he’s never had to do it as a beloved veteran teacher in the system who is a go-to guy for many district curricular and union matters.

**Scenario II: The Slacker**

Recently, a student entered my office after being in my music majors general music methods class. “am I going to make it through this music ed. program?” he asked. “I have an “F” for Foundations of Music Education and I am so ready to be out of here.” Foundations is like “Introduction to the Profession,” by the way. I replied, “You have an “F” in Foundations because you never did the field work in fall, ’08, and the ‘incomplete’ I gave you became an ‘F.’” “you know how it is,” he said, “being gay, you know? Things come up—one crisis after the other.” What more should I do? How should I answer the final comment?

I told him that allowing him to make up the fall ’08 class was probably possible if I wrote a letter to the dean asking to be able to do so; I encouraged him to try to use the closing weeks of class. After he left, I thought a while and later wrote him a longer email, copied to the chair, that outlined what might be done and what I’d recommend he do: give up the off-campus adult flag corps he’s been in, concentrate on getting the recital ready and finishing all classes—suggesting he complete the field work for the old class and current class after the semester closed, but before public schools are out for the summer, and be sure he is completely healthy by getting enough sleep and avoiding seemingly chronic illness that kept him from nearly a half dozen class sessions. What else did I do? Well, sadly, a week or so later, I gave him a second “incomplete” in the general music methods class; only about half the total work was done.

Further thought: I am going to make him write me a request to complete the fall ’08 class, since I have ask the dean to let me let him do so. Nothing is so unusual about this student—well, he IS gay—but we’re all here because we believe that’s NOT unusual! I let the “you’re gay, too” comment go, but I will probably bring it up when the inevitable meeting is held to resolve all the outstanding work. “Slackers” are found in all facets of humanity, so being gay is not an issue, he must know. He may make it through the program the same as everyone else—when he finally buckles down and makes it his primary mission to do so. I may also suggest he talk to those on campus who might counsel him in organizing time, managing crises, and bolstering his self-esteem in terms of projecting himself as successful.
Unless he brings it up, I cannot talk about what will probably kill him in the classroom: a tenor voice used in such a way that “sounds gay.” Now don’t fly off the handle with me; there’s also the “college” hair, peaked like the curl on the top of the Gerber baby from the 60’s. Yes, it’s the style, and that can be changed. I will stick to talk of dispositions of teachers, period, ‘til he gives me entrée to go further; I have coached several students on “acting” in teaching, and this may be one more person that I help. This is the line: He will teach music if he makes it through the program musically and academically—then the hard work will be to manage the students in terms of planning, interacting, and reflecting.

Scenario III: Moving to a Large City

As she graduated several years ago, a student outlined her plans to me for getting a music teaching position in a large eastern port city, and moving there with her partner. She did this successfully, keeping me abreast of things the first year or so. After a gap of several years, she again reported success, a change of positions with in the system and apparently, a change of partners. After that, I did not hear from her again and did not think of her until I started typing this paper. Should I follow up soon? Why? What will be my purpose for following up? What might I ask her about here school system?

This is a rather benign “go-to;” this is a student who’s apparently “settled in” and is very very comfortable with herself as a lesbian. And we long ago had the talk that she’s a music teacher first. I would like to follow up to see if she finished her masters, has “worked her way up” and what she might say to other LGBT novice teachers about living in a large urban area—to which many LGBT folks flee from respective podunks—vs. a smaller town or suburb. I diverge to say that that I’ve several times had to counsel students to consider urban vs. rural or small towns if they had concerns. I did and do this with full realization that comfort levels with being out or not out vary, and we can adapt to fit our surroundings within reason. My main reason to follow up will be to confirm or disconfirm some of the assertions I’ve made and actions I’ve taken in order to expand my vocabulary as a go-to guy.

Scenario IV: Chance Encounter

I greeted an outstanding former student at the state MEA conference a year or so ago, thinking little of it. I’d had him in one methods class, he later completed his masters and went on to teach in a nice suburb. ON my way home from the conference, in another large city, in a popular, ostensibly gay restaurant and club, there he was. I struck up a conversation, only to learn of the fear that still haunts him “if anyone finds out” if anyone in his district—usually thought to be very progressive system. He mentioned his partner of a few years, and told me that the student who asked the original question was in the next district over, working as a very successful music educator. Within a couple days, I got a nice email from this fellow, reminding me of his need for keeping my confidence. I assured him I would.
Questions: Do you let these people walk by you when you see them? How is the conference different from the restaurant? Should I follow up with this student?

I would never ignore a person I know wherever I might encounter them. I know this is may be “just me,” but I try to be friendly. Granted, the level of interaction will be different at the conference (professional) than the bar/restaurant (social). I won’t follow up further beyond a warm greeting next time I see him and will honor his wish to remain as he is.

**Scenario V: The Outcast**

As faculty advisor to the Phi Mu Alpha chapter at my school, I recently learned what had befallen one of the brothers—after asking where he was after not seeing him around for academic advising. He’d been disowned by his family after coming out, was out of school and working as many hours as he could to maintain an apartment and keep going. The chapter officers discussed several ways that they might help him, settling on one or two actions. What did I do? As his advisor, I simply sent him a supportive email, and offered help with choosing classes and getting going again. I have spoken to him in passing when he’s been back on campus for our initiation ritual and several concerts. Should I follow up with this student? In what capacity? What more should I offer?

In fact, he did ask me to meet with him to choose classes when I saw him at one of the on-campus activities. I will drop him an email to suggest this within the month for fall semester. Should he ask for help with emancipated student status, or have issues with being on his own, I will probably refer him to various campus resources. I will work with him as advisor, and not so much as fraternity chapter advisor, though there is some overlap. The latter can be more social—or too social—and he has no problem fitting in the with others in the fraternity.

**Scenario VI: Repeated Needs**

The last scenario is more fictional: a student came to my office for advice about coursework and scheduling, mentioned the campus gay groups (having seen my “safe Place” sticker) and talked at length about his own struggles to be out in a small town, and the relief of coming to a larger city for college. A few days later, he came by again, rehashing some of the same questions and concerns. How many “go-tos” are enough? Where do I refer him? How do I transition from me to others?

Continuing to try to counsel a student beyond a second time or delving in to areas where most of us do not have training can be counter-productive, and begin to bog us down in problems that we should not own. So, when the student appeared the third time, I suggested visits to the Multicultural Affairs, counseling, and other agencies as outlined in the Safe Places materials we’d all received.
So, several points emerge from these scenarios as I summarize. Again, these may be points on which little need be said: we go-to guys and gals all know what to do and where the lines are, don’t we? Yes, most of us have worked out over time the ways in which we can be helpful without getting pulled into private lives. Yet, we never know when out empathetic natures may not be an asset. A few points: First, you will notice that the “go-to” aspects of all the scenarios are not the same. In some cases, there was no intentionality on the part of the student; we just happened to meet. I count it as a “go-to” because of what we happened to discuss. Second, former students were also in the mix; they may feel freer talking after they leave—and sometimes they did not need to talk while in college, or weren’t event out to themselves. Third, these days some of the interactions could take place via email, probably more with former students and more by way of following up. Fourth, in terms of following up: doing so shows you care, but can also draw one in. Finally, we need to model what to say and how to deal with sensitive matters so that our students can help their future students, especially those who will teach at the secondary school level.

The last point arose as I checked in on the young teacher in the first scenario; he is indeed teaching in a district with a strong music program in a well-heeled suburb of a large city and loves it. He’s gotten his masters and says he’s “married to his job” which is his third. He says he knows that some of his students know he’s gay, and feels some of them would like to talk. The lines of potential communication are different, but oddly he said some of the same things I mentioned a few minutes ago while discussing his scenario: he’s there to teach music, and if the students express a need to talk, he’d feel the guidance department might be the best place for them to start. He would not rule out some limited communication were the counselors to ask him in on student questions. In the end, I feel like I told him the right thing those years ago.

Like many others here, I am indebted to Dr. Madsen for bringing up the need for hearing from LGBT sectors of our profession at the first Qualitative Methodologies conference on this very campus in 1994. I was in the audience the day he said it, and that is a rough paraphrase. And thanks to Drs. Bergonzi and Carter for getting us to the actual event. So, by Wednesday, you will have heard from us, then, and in concert with SMTE and others, we can insert LBGT awareness into all levels of our professional lives as music educators.