Queering the Past(s)
Notes for Teachers

For a page-by-page guide of notes and further resources for teachers, please click here.
Can we use modern terms for identities to describe people from the past? It is true that words such as “homosexual” and “transgender” are modern inventions. But does that mean that people from the past did not have same-sex relationships? Absolutely not. For some ancient societies such relationships were normal and even expected, but sometimes only in particular ways. Does it mean that people from the past didn’t recognise more than two genders, and move between them? Again, no. Most ancient societies recognised at least three genders.

Rome’s Pliny the Elder, in his book, Natural History, wrote: ‘Women transforming into men is not an idle story’. He claimed to have met someone to whom it had happened. With modern medical knowledge we can speculate how this might have been true. Pliny had only the evidence of his eyes, and the honest testimony of others, to go on, which led him to conclude that changing sex was rare but possible.

Ancient people might not have understood their experiences in the same terms that we do. They might not have had our scientific knowledge. But they were humans like us and shared many of our needs and desires (for instance, for air, water, food). Although everyone is shaped and constrained by their cultures, we can still meaningfully compare ideas from different societies about gender and sexuality.
As a result of changing government policies and statutory guidance, the role of English secondary schools in educating about LGBTQ+ experiences and issues has changed drastically in recent years.

Section 28 was introduced under Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1988 and it prohibited the ‘promotion of homosexuality’ by local authorities. In practice, not only did lesbian and gay identities become taboo in English schools, but the complete spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities did. As famed drag queen Divina De Campo explained on Drag Race UK Season 1, ‘For most teachers, that meant [homosexuality] could not even be spoken about… it just erases people completely’. Although Section 28 was repealed in England in 2003, this law had trained a generation of teachers to steer clear of LGBTQ+ topics. It meant that, by the early-mid 2000s, there was a dearth of resources suitable for educating schoolchildren about the experiences and identities of LGBTQ+ people.

In 2010, the Equality Act outlined the responsibilities of public sector schools in relation to advancing equality of opportunity and minimising disadvantage suffered by those who are or who are connected to those with LGBTQ+ identities. It also required the fostering of ‘good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it’. The 2010 Equality Act did not include any mandatory areas of curriculum content, however, as the 2014 .gov guide for schools and the 2010 Equality act makes clear. The result? Many schools seem to have avoided teaching explicitly about LGBTQ+ identities and issues throughout the 2010s. Stonewall’s 2017 School Report surveyed over 3,700 young people across Britain on their experiences of secondary school. Of this sample, 40% reported never being taught anything about LGBTQ+ identities or issues in school, 76% reported never being taught about bisexual identities or issues in school and 77% reported never being taught about gender identity or what ‘trans’ means in school.
In September of 2021, Boris Johnson’s government introduced statutory requirements for schools to include Sex and Relationships Education as part of the secondary curriculum. In relation to LGBTQ+ issues and identities, these requirements state ‘In teaching Relationships Education and RSE, schools should ensure that the needs of all pupils are appropriately met, and that all pupils understand the importance of equality and respect’ and that schools should ensure that ‘this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a stand-alone unit or lesson’. At last, students in England have the legally protected right to be taught about LGBTQ+ issues and identities as part of their secondary school curriculum!

This mandate gives teachers both an opportunity and a challenge. A small group of classicists thought that Classics had something to offer here, and in 2018 we began to brainstorm about topics that would be useful. We designed Queering the Past(s) to give teachers and young students information from antiquity that would help them to respond productively to that mandate. At the same time, we have attempted to raise interesting questions about the material, so that students gain confidence in addressing critical (and contentious) issues. We have created two chapters so far, one on the Lesbian poet Sappho and one on the Roman emperor Elagabalus.

These resources are not intended to be used as a sole Scheme of Learning to satisfy the legal requirement to teach LGBTQ+ identities and issues as part of the SRE curriculum. Rather, they could be used as part of a wider curriculum which seeks to educate all students about the long and varied histories of LGBTQ+ people. Our hope is that teachers and students will be able to use these e-books, lessons, and activities to explore LGBTQ+ identities and issues in a range of subject lessons such as English, History and Classics as well as SRE. Equally, they could be used by LGBTQ+ student groups and as part of a school-wide celebration of LGBT History Month (February) or Pride Month (June).
In utilising these resources, school leaders and teachers would be working to satisfy the 2021 requirement that LGBTQ+ issues be fully integrated throughout the curriculum. Moreover, by educating students about the ancient history of LGBTQ+ identities and issues, teachers will be meeting the 2010 Equality Act’s requirement to minimise disadvantage and to promote understanding, by dispelling the inaccurate notion that LGBTQ+ people are ‘new’ or a ‘fad.’ In turn, this will help schools to satisfy their inspecting bodies, since both OFSTED and The Independent Schools’ Inspectorate expect schools to enable students to appreciate and value diversity as well as to demonstrate sensitivity and tolerance.\(^7\)

The shadow of Section 28 looms large over the English education sector, and we are only taking our first steps into a new world where LGBTQ+ people must be recognised in classrooms. We offer these resources for you to use in whatever way you deem most appropriate. We hope that they fire the interest and enthusiasm of your learners and that they make some small difference towards helping create a world where all LGBTQ+ young people feel safe, seen, and celebrated in their school. Each Queering the Past(s) chapter is framed so as to raise questions and provoke the kind of discussion that leads students to think for themselves about important current issues. For a live page by page set of teacher resources and ‘how to use’ guide please click here.

Finally, Queering the Past(s) has been created by a large group of individuals, many of whom operate in and around higher education institutions from the US and UK. Authors and editors include: postgraduate students at Oxford University and University of California Los Angeles; faculty at King’s College London, University of California Los Angeles, San Diego State University, Hamilton College; curatorial staff of the Cambridge Museum; and educational consultants based in Oxford, Bristol, London, Washington D.C., and New York City.
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Workes Cited

1. The Pliny quote is from Book 7 of Natural History.
7. Stonewall, (ND) ‘What steps are schools, colleges and settings required to take in order to be LGBTQ+ inclusive? An overview of the legal and Ofsted requirements’ https://www.stonewall.org.uk/what-steps-are-schools-colleges-and-settings-required-to-take-order-be-lgbtq-inclusive [Accessed 05.03.22]
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