

S4 — Episode 4 — Teaching Gender and Sexuality in English as a Second/Other Language Education

Goldstein, Tara and Friesen, Doug (Producers). (2022, Jan 15, 2022) [Audio podcast]

Tara talks to Tyson Seburn who has recently published a book for English Language teachers called *How to Write Inclusive Materials*. In the interview Tyson discusses what inclusive English language materials look like and what English language teachers and curriculum writers need to consider.

Tara: Hello and welcome back to season four of Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13, signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaty, signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands. In Toronto, Ontario, and Canada, we were all— we are all treaty people who need to work towards responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action. Today, Tyson Seburn joins us to talk about their new book about incorporating topics of gender and sexuality into English language classrooms. The book is called *How to Write Inclusive Materials*. And it is part of a series of training books for English language teaching writers. Tyson! Welcome to Gender Sexuality School, we're so happy to have you here.

Tyson: Thanks, Tara. I'm really happy to be here. And I'm thrilled that you invited me to talk about my book.

Tara: So, to begin our interview, can you tell us a little bit about the work you do as an English language teacher and curriculum developer, and why you thought it was important to write this book about inclusive English language teaching materials?

Tyson: Sure, absolutely. I've been in this profession for twenty-two or -three years now; I started in Korea. And at the time, I was advised actually not to disclose my LGBTQ-ness to my students. And you know, it was the late 90s. And I didn't, and I was young, and I didn't really think too— too much about it. So, I did do that. But as I've gotten older, and I've worked in different contexts, such as the one that University of Toronto, which is really entirely international students, they are doing a foundation year program to have a condition removed on their acceptance to their undergrad program. So that's who I'm, I'm pretty much dealing with now. But as I've gotten older, I've realized that, you know how we say we are models for students in terms of being lifelong learners. And if we don't have the answer to a question, we should say so and just try to figure it out. That same thing applies, I think, when it comes to how we present ourselves, and how we talk about ourselves and our identities. And so, as I've realized, I have students who identify within LGBTQ community, it was a disservice, I think, in my respect, to not actually be a model in that way for my students. And so that was the realization I came to more or less in the last 10 years, basically. And then, as I've done so I've— it has opened my eyes to how little queer people are talked about or discussed or even visible in the English language classroom. And that includes the materials. And so, when we do, in fact, or when we have, in fact, included queer people into materials, which is very rare, I might say, it's often done in a very othering manner, like— it's, we're isolated into one specific topic where you talk about us, and then we're done. Or people are making decisions about queer people without the voices of queer people actually included. And so, there's a lot of problems. And this goes in as deeply as teacher training courses, they really ignore this aspect. And

it's not just LGBTQ identifying people, but it's also people of all sorts of underrepresented and minoritized groups. And so, at many conferences over the last maybe five years, I would say, people are starting to discuss including LGBTQ people, or the fact at least that they're invisible. But not a lot has been actually done in terms of producing materials that are inclusive or helping people to understand how to do that. And so that was really the impetus for me putting together this book. And I'm really thankful that the publisher has contacted me and asked me, "Hey, would you like to write this book in our series?" And so, I said, "Yes," obviously.

Tara: Fantastic. Can you talk a little bit about the challenges of addressing issues of gender and sexuality in the English language classroom if there hasn't been much representation, and your work is at the forefront of making this happen? When you yourself do this work or your colleagues try and do this work, it must be challenging.

Tyson: Well, I think it's primarily challenging because there's been no training or support to do so. And so, any instructor who recognizes this problem is doing it kind of on their own, you know, they're trying to sort of, on the spot, figure out ways in which to be inclusive. And sometimes you do that successfully. And sometimes you make a little bit of an error, right, because you don't have any guidance. And so, you know, with, with international students, as the entire cohort of my profession, it's, it's different than having, you know, a set of domestic Canadian students who've sort of grown up in this society where, at least to a good degree, LGBTQ has been accepted. And it's just part of normal society. You can't say that for certain when you're dealing with international students, because they come from a wide variety of contexts. And so, you can face some very obvious homophobic reactions, sometimes from students, you can face the snickers and the giggles, at first, you know. And that can cause instructors, I think, a lot of apprehension to actually even trying to change the situation and make the materials more inclusive. But I think once we recognize that our students themselves need to identify with the materials and see themselves in the materials, you can find invisibility in all sorts of regards, not just regarding queer people. So, I would say the challenge is largely our lack of support, lack of training, and apprehension about doing it wrong.

Tara: Have you had an opportunity to do any professional development with English language teachers, yourself, perhaps at the conferences, perhaps within the program? And if you have, what kinds of things do you like to bring up or talk about during these PD sessions?

Tyson: I've been really lucky, actually, especially over the last couple of years to give conference talks and plenaries and things like that about this issue. I think I'm fortunate that I have a platform, a public platform to be able to give ideas to teachers; I would say that the two primary aspects I usually try to get across initially is what it means to be inclusive. So, what are principles for inclusion that you need to consider. And then one or two sample approaches to doing so. And so in, in the book, I talk about really, what it means to other a group of people, and then by contrast, what it means to be inclusive. And so, I won't do all of them here. But for example, you don't want to spotlight any particular student. And you know, you don't want to, without their consent, make them the representative. So, if you found that one of your students is gay, for example, they don't automatically become the go to source of

information. So that's one aspect of inclusion, is not doing that. Another aspect of inclusion is to increase the frequency by which queer people appear in the materials or the narratives. So that, and this accomplishes a couple of things, but one is that it becomes more usualized to see us, right, and so that we're not weird or strange or whatever. And secondly, the more frequently a variety of individuals appear, the more likely it is to avoid a stereotypical trope, for example, because you have more opportunity, right? If you only have one gay person appearing in your entire materials, chances are you're going to misrepresent, you know, the community because you're picking sort of one. And for, you know, straight white ELT materials writers, that is typically going to be the cleanest cut, the most perfect, the most straightest-looking sort of queer person, which is sort of a stereotype. And it ignores a wide variety. So, of course, what we want to do is individualize and make sure that, you know, there's a wide variety of narratives, both, you know, positive and sort of realistic. So, there's a couple of those examples of, of inclusion, inclusive principles. But then I move on to two approaches to operationalizing these principles, one of which is a usualization approach, which I have briefly just mentioned, but Professor Sue Sanders came up with this term or coined this term a while ago, instead of normalization as, as, as a term, where, basically, as I said, you're increasing the frequency by which any underrepresented group appears in the narratives. And so, there's a lot more variety. And it's not the unique characteristics of that groups', per se, that you're focusing on as much as it is matter of factly, including a wide variety of people. So that's sort of the usualization approach. And in the book, I talk about, basically how to do that through the images, the text, the audio, and so on. And then there's a sort of nameless approach, which I call just a more disruptive approach, simply because there's no name for it exactly. But it is where you actually try to connect all learners with the narratives that are unique, or the experiences that are unique to queer people or any underrepresented group, actually, where we look for something in society that is a status quo that is not serving people well, at least any particular group. And we try to find a connection between how that community's experiences are affected by the status quo, and anybody's experiences, are affected in that sort of way. And so, one example of that was when you have a sort of a binary choice in society, you only you can only choose this or that. And an example of that would be washrooms, public washrooms. And so, materials may be designed around the experiences of, of a non-binary person, when they're experiencing a choice like this, what is an either-or choice? Which washroom do you go into? And, and we can hear those experiences from that person, then what anybody will do, the learners will do that is, of course, that raises awareness of that. But then they try to connect that to their own experiences, where maybe it's not washrooms that cause that problem, but maybe it is, because sometimes you see those washroom signs, where it has, you know, a woman with a shopping bag to indicate it's a female. And that, of course, is maybe not something they identify with. But beyond that, it could be something else in society, where you have really just this binary choice, and you wish there was more gray area, sorry, you wish there was more gray area. The first thing that came to my mind was when you have women's and men's clothing fashions, right? You kind of, do you shop in the men's department, because those clothes fit you better, or do you shop in the women's department because those clothes fit you better like, and you have to make that choice. And so, some learners who are not non-binary may still actually be in a situation where they have this sort of, "I'm not A and not B", and that can create a connection between their experiences of the world, and LGBTQ experiences of the world. So those are sort of two general

approaches that we go for. And I talked about that a lot more in the book than I can easily do so right now.

Tara: Excellent. Thank you so much for that. So, Tyson, I see that you have collaborated on the book with several other writers. Can you tell us a little bit about them and a little bit about your collaboration process? Because I always find those stories really, really interesting.

Tyson: Absolutely. I mean, one reason for the collaboration was simply to— because if you look at my own identity, you know, which is a white cis man, who's gay, and I have, you know, a certain amount of experience with, especially with regards to being a gay man in this world, but I don't have experience as being a Black woman in this world, for example, or a Muslim woman or a mixed race or an, you know, an older person, etc., not yet anyway. And so, I wanted to make sure that I could cover some blind spots that I may or may not be aware of, in my own approach to inclusive materials. And so, these colleagues of mine, I knew to some degree from different past interactions like last year, I organized a conference on race and queerness in English language teaching. And these, two of these were speakers, two of these women were speakers, and I was very impressed with their, their ideas and what they had to say about inclusive materials, and I thought their perspectives would be very, very welcomed. So, and another one I knew from, from podcasts sort of like this one, where she talked about these problems of diversity and inclusion. And so, I had basically written the draft of the book. And I invited, or the publishers invited these three individuals to go through the draft of the book, give their comments about anything that they wanted to within the book that I had said, and add in their own perspectives throughout the book, wherever it seemed organic for them to do so. And so, it really enhanced the book's perspective and allowed them, I think, a different kind of credibility to the materials that are in the book, because it wasn't simply just coming from a gay man's perspective.

Tara: That's such an interesting process. Because you don't often hear about a collaboration like that. And it's clear that your contributors' names are right on the front covers, so that their work isn't included in a footnote thanking them for their, their insights. And the whole idea of being able to enhance a preliminary draft with your own perspective, in your own experiences is a really interesting way forward. And did any of your collaborators talk about the experience of working with you in this way? Did you get any feedback about your process?

Tyson: Well, I mean, I did, I did get a lot of gratitude, actually.

Tara: Nice.

Tyson: I mean, they, they did thank me a lot for being included. And being, I suppose, selected, I guess, if you want to call it that. The, and the fact that they felt they had learned quite a bit from, from me as well. And at that point, you know, I don't think they knew how much I had learned from them. But I certainly did. And the book wouldn't be as good as it is if it weren't for them, which is really why they deserve to have acknowledgement on the cover, as well as you know, a certain portion of royalties that

come from the book as well. So, you know, I consider, you know, yes, I did the majority of it, but it, it would certainly not be as good a book if they hadn't been included.

Tara: Thank you. As we start to close up our interview, I always love to hear, who do you hope will read the book?

Tyson: Well, ultimately, I hope the target audience, which is people who are writing English language teaching materials, are the primary people who noticed the book and want to benefit from the book. You know, there's a whole subset of my profession that really focuses solely on that aspect. And they're not teachers necessarily, they're actually written materials writers. So, this is meant kind of for the, the materials writer who does this regularly and wants to figure out a better way to do it, so that they can include a wide variety of people in, in the best fashion possible. But of course, I mean, ultimately, I hope publishers are— take notice of the book too, because, you know, they do hold the key to what gets published and what doesn't get published. So, we can do whatever we want as teachers or materials writers, but if they actually don't publish, then you know, it goes basically nowhere except in your little bubble in your classroom. So, I hope it's them, that too.

Tara: And so, do I. Tyson, thanks so much for joining us today. I really loved hearing you speak about your new book for English language materials writers and curriculum writers. Tyson Seburn is an English for Academic Purposes instructor and assistant Academic Director of International Programs at New College, University of Toronto. He holds an MA in Educational Technology from the University of Manchester. Tyson's main interest focuses on— on identity and its various impacts on teacher development. Tyson's new book, *How to Write Inclusive Materials*, just published in 2021, is available on amazon.ca. All right, that's our podcast for today. You can find this podcast at WWW.gendersexualitieschool.ca. This episode was produced with the support of the New College Initiative Fund and from Doug Friesen, who is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Thanks to musician Kate Reid, sound engineer Lisa Patterson, and musician Doug Friesen for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I'm Tara Goldstein. All the best.