



An Analysis of LGBTQ+ Courses: Recommendations for Developing Content for LGBTQ+ Individuals and Allies in Academia

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Abstract

This work-in-progress paper examines four free online courses addressing LGBTQ+ topics and issues and provides recommendations for creating new content and resources for allies in higher education. This exploratory work is guided by the following questions: What free LGBTQ+ courses are available for learners and educators? What content do these courses cover? What are the overlaps among these courses and what new strategies could be adopted when developing new LGBTQ+ resources for people in academia? The scope of this paper explores the content and instructional strategies of courses offered on Coursera, a massive open online course (MOOC) platform. Our preliminary findings indicate that the courses offer many insights and strategies for becoming an ally, fostering inclusive environments, and showing up for LGBTQ+ students; however, they put a smaller emphasis on LGBTQ+ academics and their experiences. Based on these findings, recommendations for educators and course developers are suggested.

Background

According to a 2019 survey on exploring the workplace for LGBT+ physical scientists conducted by the Institute of Physics, Royal Astronomical Society and Royal Society of Chemistry, 28% of LGBT+ respondents reported that they had considered leaving their job due to the discrimination they faced in their workplace [1]. The same report also revealed that nearly half of the respondents highlighted a lack of awareness of LGBT+ issues in the workplace. Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ marginalization is also found in academia. Research shows that LGBTQ+ students in engineering are more disadvantaged and face greater marginalization than their non-LGBTQ+ peers [2-4]. Cech and Waidzunus [2] found that LGB students in engineering navigate a chilly climate where homosexuality is not valued and face heteronormative actions, as a result of which they employ coping strategies such as not revealing their identity. Likewise, Hughes [4] found that undergraduate engineering students were concerned about finding a job after graduating due to being openly gay and the hegemonic masculinity in engineering programs influenced students negatively. Similar to LGBTQ+ students' experiences, LGBTQ+ engineering faculty report discomfort in the workplace and overt hostility toward them [5]. Notwithstanding, research indicates that LGBQ faculty and staff play an important role in the retention of LGBQ and STEM students through their support and mentoring [6-7].

Given the oppressive climate and discrimination that LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff still experience within academic settings, there have been increasing actions to address these issues and to promote LGBTQ+ equality. Some of these initiatives consist of Safe Zone ally workshops offered at various universities and by non-profit associations [e.g., 8]. Other efforts include courses, online learning modules and webinar series to raise awareness about LGBTQ+ issues and help people understand how to become an ally and advocate—many of them offered at no cost to participants. However, comparative analyses or summaries of available LGBTQ+ resources seem to remain unavailable, and more work is needed to understand what areas existing LGBTQ+ resources (including courses, workshops, and webinars) cover, the overlaps across these resources, and what content needs to be further developed.

Thus, this work-in-progress paper examines free online LGBTQ+ courses, specifically those offered on Coursera. Coursera was chosen to begin the analysis because (a) as a MOOC provider, it provides learners (82 million registered users) with an opportunity to access free courses from anywhere; and (b) with an employee group called, *Queersera*, it aims to support LGBTQ+ people by offering courses and hosting events [9].

Methods

We examined the list of courses on Coursera using key terms such as “*LGBTQ*”, “*LGBTQ in the workplace*”, “*gender*”, and “*sexuality*”. We found six courses offered in English with a focus on LGBTQ+ issues (the analysis was conducted in June 2021). In this paper we focus on four courses (see Table 1), as the other two courses were heavily related to health rather than to academia. Two of the courses are offered by the University of Colorado, one by University of Pittsburgh, and one by University of Minnesota. The courses cover topics such as the history of LGBTQ+ identities and activism, recommendations for educators in teaching LGBTQ+ inclusion, LGBTQ+ issues in the workplace, and identifying as transgender.

Table 1. *Overview of selected LGBTQ+ courses*

Course title	Estimate time for course completion	Offered by	# of people enrolled	Course link
Queering Identities: LGBTQ+ Sexuality and Gender Identity	20 hours	The University of Colorado	18,084	https://www.coursera.org/learn/queeringidentities
Queering the Schoolhouse: LGBTQ+ Inclusion for Educators	12 hours	The University of Colorado	3,492	https://www.coursera.org/learn/queeringtheschoolhouse
Gender and Sexuality: Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace	16 hours	University of Pittsburgh	32,992	https://www.coursera.org/learn/gender-sexuality
What does it mean to identify as Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC)	26 hours	University of Minnesota	7,021	https://www.coursera.org/learn/tgnc-gender-identity-social-change

To examine the content and instructional strategies of the selected courses, we closely studied each course’s syllabus, topics covered in videos and readings, as well as course activities and assessments. After examining each course, we made a comparison between the courses as discussed in the findings section.

Findings

After examining the course content, we found many overlaps among the courses. All of the courses begin with an introduction to LGBTQ+ terminology that includes key terms such as *gender* and *sex*, as shown in Table 2. These topics are covered mainly through lecture videos and in readings. While the topic of *becoming an ally* is covered in three of the courses, two of them focus on the issues LGBTQ+ individuals’ experience in the workplace. The courses discuss next steps for promoting LGBTQ+ equality, strategies for what to do in certain scenarios and how to become an actionable ally. The course “*Queering the Schoolhouse*” provides different ways that educators can employ in their classes to create a more welcoming environment. Overall, the course content ranges from LGBTQ+ terminology, being an ally, history and culture, LGBTQ+ experiences in school, at home, and in the workplace to medical transition.

Despite the wide-ranging topics in the courses, the main focus is predominantly on LGBTQ+ students. Interviews with LGBTQ+ students and their experiences in both academic and non-academic settings and recommendations for faculty regarding transforming their curriculum are useful in better understanding LGBTQ+ student experiences and creating more inclusive environments. However, we could not find any videos, readings, or other resources that depict experiences of LGBTQ+ faculty and staff. The course “*What does it mean to identify as TGNC*” consists of videos on experiences of homeless and military LGBTQ+ people, however, overall, none of the courses touches upon the challenges that LGBTQ+ faculty experience other than highlighting what faculty could do to support LGBTQ+ students. The course “*Queering the Schoolhouse: LGBTQ+ Inclusion for Educators*” provides many strategies for educators to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion such as assigning readings written by LGBTQ+ people, asking students’ pronouns, and supporting clubs or extracurricular activities that support LGBTQ+ students. However, experiences of LGBTQ+ faculty and staff remain uncovered.

Table 2. *Topics covered in the selected LGBTQ+ courses*

Queering Identities	Queering the Schoolhouse	Gender and Sexuality	What does it mean to identify as TGNC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queering Identities • Terminology • Sex and Gender • Strategies for When You Don't Know What to Do • Intersectionality • Gender as a Social Construct • Learning and Expressing Gender • Gender Resistance • What is Gender Transition? • Intersex: Genitals, Chromosomes, and Hormones • Sex and Gender in Sports • Moving Beyond ‘Born That Way’ • Sexuality • The Invention of Homosexuality • A Brief Queer History • Queer Theory: Challenging ‘Common Sense’ Assumptions • Queer Theory: When ‘Queer’ Became a Verb • The Bathroom Issue • Racism in Queer Communities • Queer(Ing) Religion • Queer Parenting • Queer(Ing) Sex Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminology and Issues • Allyship, Accomplices, and Advocates • What Queer Means • Allyship • Privilege • A History of LGBTQ+ People in Schools • The Current Climate for LGB+, Transgender and Nonbinary Students • How Communities Reinforce Gender Norms • Bullying As a Systemic Issue • Showing up for LGBTQ+ Students: Five Strategies • Building an LGBTQ+ Inclusive Classroom • What LGBTQ+ Folks Have to Offer • Transforming Your Curriculum for LGBTQ+ Inclusion • Social Action for LGBTQ+ Inclusion • Designing Your Path Toward LGBTQ+ Inclusion • Curriculum Revision • Using your Research to Guide your Teaching • What's Next for LGBTQ+ Inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LGBTQIA • Sex • Gender • Sexuality • Gender in Theory • Intersectionality • Gender and Sex Discrimination • LGBTQIA Issues in the Workplace • Sexuality in Theory • LGBTQIA Identities and Rights • LGB at Work • Challenges Faced by LGB Individuals in the Workplace • Strategies for Making Workplaces More LGB Inclusive • Theories of Transgender Identity • Global Transgender Identities • Genderism • Transgender Issues in the Workplace • Being a Meaningful Ally to Transgender Individuals at Work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender • Identifying as TGNC • Pronouns and Language • Theory of Gender Development • Dysphoria and Mental Health • Digital Stories • Parenting and Family • Dating and Relationships • Gender Affirmation • Coming out • Historical Role Models and Events • Artistry • Media and Culture • Transgender Rights • Legal Issues and Discrimination in America • Intersectional Identities • Homelessness • Anti-Transgender Violence • Incarceration • Healthcare Disparities • Military Personnel • How To Become an Actionable Ally • Gender Diversity in the Workplace • Creating Gender Affirming Environments • Where Do We Go From Here?

In addition to examining the content, we explored the instructional strategies used in the courses. We found that content is mostly delivered through lecture videos recorded by faculty and graduate assistants, supported by readings for each topic. In two of the courses, additional resources for students such as links to books and videos are provided. In all of the courses, quizzes, mostly multiple choice, are used as an assessment method. We observed that a discussion platform is used

as a venue for students to ask questions about the course and exchange ideas with other students. In one of the courses, for example, one student asked for clarification in the discussion board regarding how to use pronouns “*I don't understand how they/them are appropriate pronouns for a singular person to use. They/them are plural. Using them for an individual person seems like it would add a bit of confusion to conversations, and make it seem like that person has multiple personality disorder. Seriously please help me understand.*” Six students responded to this post and helped this student understand how to use “*they/them.*” Table 3 shows the instructional strategies used in the courses.

Table 3. *Instructional strategies used in the courses*

Queering Identities	Queering the Schoolhouse	Gender and Sexuality	What does it mean to identify as TGNC
Lecture videos	Lecture videos	Lecture videos	Lecture videos
Readings	Readings	Readings	Readings
Quizzes	Quizzes	Quizzes	Quizzes
Discussion forum	Discussion forum	Discussion forum	Discussion forum
Case studies	Case studies	Discussion prompts (lecture reflection)	Discussion prompts
Embedded quizzes in lectures	Resource guide	Surveys & case studies	Surveys (pre- & post-assessment)
		Student resources	Games
		Peer-graded assignments	Student resources
		YouTube videos	Peer-graded assignments
			YouTube videos

Note: *Student resources include documents such as gender inclusive language guidelines, book recommendations, and approaches to LGBTQ+ inclusion*

Conclusions and Recommendations

We examined four LGBTQ+ courses on Coursera and found similarities and differences among the courses in terms of the topics discussed and instructional strategies. Given the emphasized importance of LGBTQ+ faculty’s mentorship in the retention of LGBTQ+ students [6-7] and the challenges they experience [5], we recommend that more content on LGBTQ+ faculty, and their experiences be developed. Including interviews with LGBTQ+ faculty, particularly from disciplines facing higher degrees of hostility (such as engineering), in such courses might be useful to gain in-depth insights into their experiences and better understand what challenges they face in the workplace. Another recommendation is that in addition to LGBTQ+ faculty, experiences of LGBTQ+ staff be included in LGBTQ+ resources given how closely students, faculty, and staff work on a weekly or even daily basis in academic settings. With regard to instructional strategies, it appears that all the courses employ similar ways to engage learners, deliver content, and assess understanding. We recommend creating more opportunities for learners such as discussion forums where they can interact with each other, ask questions, express opinions freely, and support others by replying to posts.

The findings of our study indicate a need for additional content, encompassing experiences of a wider cross-section of the LGBTQ+ academic community, including faculty and staff. Our findings also indicate a need for a variety of resources to address the needs of a different audience, including department chairs and deans to assist them in support of their LGBTQ+ faculty. We hope that this effort provides a useful way to understand what topics are addressed in the courses discussed and what needs to be done to create more informative and affirmative content for LGBTQ+ individuals. The scope of this work was limited to academia and Coursera. Moving forward, our goal is to include more LGBTQ+ courses in the analysis and broaden our study to other platforms beyond Coursera, as well as examining webinars and workshops on related topics.

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