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Student teachers learn to tackle homophobia

by Deena Kinarthy

Homophobia is still rampant in schools, but two groups at UVic are hoping to change that.

UVic's faculty of education and UVic Pride joined forces to conduct a workshop for elementary education students on how to integrate gender issues into the classroom. The workshop, held Oct. 24, was the first of its kind on Vancouver Island. It focused on problems such as name-calling, discrimination, and homophobia.

Demand from students was so great that Pride Outreach, the group hosting the workshop, had a waiting list of people trying to get in, said Kelley Logue, chairperson of UVic Pride.

Brodie Metcalfe, a third-year philosophy major and one of three Pride workshop leaders, said some of the biggest dangers among schoolchildren and teachers in addressing homophobia is in not knowing how to use words and terms properly.

"If a teacher is really gung-ho about wanting to teach this terminology but they don't actually know what they really mean, and how to use them respectfully and disrespectfully, then that could be more damaging to students as they are growing up," said Metcalfe.

The workshop opened with a heated discussion on language and labels, challenging students' use of words such as transsexual, heterosexism, and queer.

The word "queer" elicited strong reactions among participants, and workshop leaders were compelled to explain how the term has changed from negative and derogatory to positive and encompassing over time.

But name-calling is still a problem in schools. According to the 2001 Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network National School Climate Survey, 83 per cent of queer students reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation and 81 per cent reported that faculty or staff rarely intervened when hearing such remarks. The survey interviewed 900 middle- and high-school-aged kids, and found that 84 per cent of students reported hearing homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke" frequently or often and 21 per cent reported being physically assaulted.

Leanna Madill, an education PhD student and sessional instructor at UVic, said education and knowledge are the keys to understanding and having the right tools to deal with queer issues in the classroom and in society at large. She said there has been a long-standing need to organize such workshops.

"I found that the issue of sexual orientation of educators and how to address various lifestyles for elementary and secondary students is not raised in my courses and I have not felt educated enough myself to speak to the issues at a level to benefit my students," said Madill. "I believe educators want to promote equality and prevent ignorance around homophobia but they need [more] education and resources; the UVic Pride presenters were able to prepare and suggest very helpful resources to meet that need."

Though the first of it's kind, Logue said the workshop will not be the last.

"It seems well-supported by the faculty and its members and we/they are together planning on expanding it further," said Logue in an e-mail.

Metcalfe said he hopes that workshops like these will continue at UVic, adding that more hours are needed to cover more material, indicated by the fact that the presenters ran out of time and did not cover every topic on their agenda.

One of the outreach team's goals is to make UVic Pride workshop's information booklets available in the UVic library. More information on can be found by visiting the UVic Pride office in SUB 118.