

'Coming out' in the classroom, but not by choice

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Researchers from Arizona State University found that active learning classrooms, which require more group work than traditional lecture courses, may create an unaccepting atmosphere for LGBTQIA students. Credit: Sandra Leander

Starting out as a college freshman can be hard.

Students are leaving home for the first time, meeting the demands of a rigorous, undergraduate college education and trying to make new friends.

And, for undergraduate students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or asexual (LGBTQIA), or who may be struggling with their identity, the biology classroom may not necessarily be a welcoming place.

In a first-of-its kind study published in the latest issue of *CBE-Life Sciences Education*, researchers from Arizona State University's School of Life Sciences found that [active learning](#) classrooms, which require more group work than traditional lecture courses, may create an unaccepting atmosphere for LGBTQIA students.

"In an active learning classroom, students are asked to interact a lot with each other and the instructor," said Katelyn Cooper, doctoral student and lead author of the study. "The students' LGBTQIA identities are more relevant in an active learning course, particularly for transgender students who may be transitioning during the semester."

In the U.S., 3.6 percent of people identify as LGBTQIA. For this study, seven students from a 180-person classroom were interviewed, which is similar to the national average.



Assistant professor Sara Brownell (L) and doctoral student Katelyn Cooper (R), both with the ASU School of Life Sciences, conducted a first-of-its-kind study on the active learning classroom experiences of LGBTQIA students. Credit: Sandra Leander

"Our goal in classrooms at Arizona State University is to be inclusive to every student, regardless of their LGBTQIA identity or any other social identity," said Sara Brownell, assistant professor with the School of Life Sciences and senior author of the study. "The national conversation right now is to move more science classrooms into the active learning model. But as we do this, we need to be cautious how these student interactions are playing out in class. These interactions among students may impact how well these LGBTQIA students are doing in the class. This study is the first to illuminate potential challenges for these students in active

learning spaces."

The researchers found that all of the students who identified as LGBTQIA struggled in some way with group work. While the students faced more opportunities to interact more closely with others, this presented more opportunities for them to have to self-identify. The researchers say this is important because often times, students come out during college years, but are hesitant to do so before they're fully ready to announce their LGBTQIA identity to the outside world.

"In a traditional lecture course, students can sit in the back of the group and be somewhat invisible," shared Brownell. "But in the interactive class, we ask them to engage with others. This is extending into conversations they don't want to have. They have to decide, 'Do I come out to this person I don't know? Do I lie? Do I change the conversation?'"

Brownell's lab studies how students learn biology in the classroom. In particular, she and her research team investigate the experiences of students with potentially underrepresented or stigmatized social identities in the classroom, including gender, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation and LGBTQIA identity.

"It has been shown that more diverse groups of people lead to better science. It's important to make sure that our next generation of scientists is diverse and this starts in the undergraduate classroom. Students with LGBTQIA identities can offer unique and important perspectives," added Cooper.

The researchers do not recommend moving away from the active learning classroom. In fact, they support the active learning model as an effective way to help retain students in STEM fields and keep them engaged in challenging topics. However, they do recommend that

instructors think carefully about how they structure group work and that instructors can work toward creating safe spaces for students to feel comfortable sharing their identities.

The next step for the researchers is exploring this topic at a national level and in different geographic locations to see whether [students](#) in other parts of the country have similar experiences in the active learning setting.

More information: K. M. Cooper et al, Coming Out in Class: Challenges and Benefits of Active Learning in a Biology Classroom for LGBTQIA Students, *Cell Biology Education* (2016). [DOI: 10.1187/cbe.16-01-0074](#)

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