



Report Dutch G.EDU Expert Meeting “Gender Education”

27 Januari 2021, 16:00-17:00, Zoom Meeting. Meeting ID: 868 7924 0932. Passcode: 540644

Introduction

For the [G.EDU project](#), GALE has spent the past two years studying ways to make gender and sexual diversity education as effective as possible. In this project, four partners from three countries are developing an online course for 15-16 year old boys about gender. GALE was responsible for the introductory module, in which the emphasis should be on explaining basic terms and concepts.

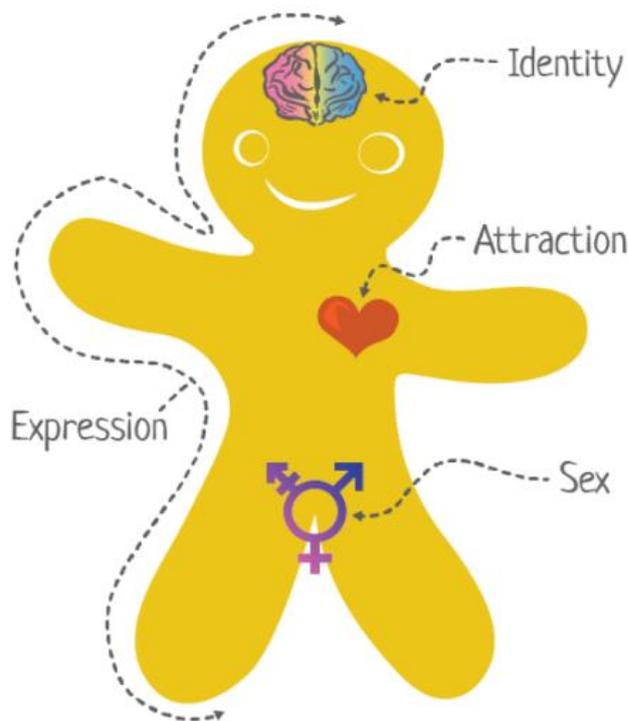
Because GALE is convinced that informational or cognitively oriented education has little effect on improving underlying negative attitudes and behavior in boys, we looked for ways to present this introduction in such a way that it sets a tone from the start that encourages interest in promotes diversity. Bearing in mind that 15-16 year old boys, especially if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have a low level of education, often in the classroom are not a progressive audience with an intrinsic interest in studying gender. The introduction of the course should therefore be primarily aimed at arousing interest and curiosity, which can eventually lead to a nuanced opinion.

The developed method

In developing the course, several existing approaches to introductions to basic concepts about gender and sexuality were considered:

1. **A cognitive explanation:** explaining the difference between gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual preference, with an extension if necessary to the range of sub-concepts that can be included, such as straight, gay, bisexual, intersex, transgender, transsexual, non-binary, genderfluid, pansexual, demisexual, asexual, questioning, queer and more. This can be done, for example, on the basis of the [gender bread person](#). In the approach developed by GALE, we did incorporate the gender bread person as an illustration, but we looked for a different approach that would challenge young people to think more actively about gender.

The original version of the gender bread person was developed by teachers who wanted to explain to students how gender and sexual diversity work. It is a cognitive approach (“explanation”) that is in line with the tradition of education, in which knowledge transfer is central. In various teaching programs that have been developed on the basis of the gender bread person, in addition to the explanation, it is also suggested that students can score themselves or reflect on how they themselves experience their gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual preference, but these programs rarely explain how teachers deal with the sensitivity of such a subject in the classroom (besides that you can only do this self-reflection in a “safe group”).



gender bread person

2. **A free choice discussion:** examining your own and others' gender identity and expressions and sexual preferences by scoring them on a sliding scale. This happens, for example, in an animation by COC Nederland “The Astronaut”, which is based on the gender bread person. GALE has not opted for this, because although this method seems very useful for young

people who are insecure and looking for an identity of their own, it is probably less suitable as a form of education for cisgender boys who consider themselves "obvious" cisgender and heterosexual.

In addition, The Astronaut and the associated "scales" have the disadvantage that a binary perspective is still used; you place yourself on a scale that runs from male to female or from gay to straight.

This has been corrected on the American website about the genderbread person: it is now recommended that you score yourself on several variations at the same time, so for example you could be a certain percentage of male, gender neutral and female *at the same time*.



Fragment from *The Astronaut*

3. **Showing role models:** showing young people images, videos or performances of people or have sessions with real people as peer educators. This method is based on the theory of social learning by Albert Bandura and on the intergroup contact theory. Bandura showed how people often learn by copying how others do things. This is called role modelling. Another set of studies formed the basis of the intergroup contact theory, which showed that people become more tolerant when they have more contact with people from other social groups. This mechanism works with real people, but it also works with video images and images to some extent. Role modelling to promote tolerance also occurs regularly in the LGBTI movement through peer education and media campaigns. In this way, a range of people with

different gender identities and sexual preferences is shown. The idea behind this is that “other” gender identities and sexual preferences become less distant, they become more authentic and real and stereotypes will be corrected.

The disadvantage of this approach is that it remains unclear which role models work best and in which situation, and for what purpose they are used. In some situations, *heteronormative* role models work well, because students then experience that LGBTIQ are “the same” and “normal”. This can work well if educators aim to “normalize” gender and sexual diversity. On the other hand, this implicitly or even explicitly confirms that heteronormativity is the norm and there is a risk that LGBTIQ people who deviate from the heteronorm are even more severely discriminated against after such education.

If the role models are *not* heteronormative (with the aim to show diversity and promote tolerance for it), there is a risk that the young people are confirmed in their prejudices (“you see, they are different/weird”). This potential affirmation of prejudice can be corrected by making the role models as real and authentic as possible. But even then there is still a risk that young people will regard the various role models shown as good exceptions to the rule (“I now know you personally are OK, but I think LGBTIQ in general are still weird”). The role model approach is therefore very vulnerable to pitfalls. GALE decided to “play” with imagery, but not to use the displayed images as role modelling in the sense of Bandura or the intergroup contact theory.



Example of role modelling type education: “Who is the hetero?” public quiz in Utrecht, 2012 (<https://www.duic.nl/cultuur/wie-is-de-hetero/>)

These are the three most common methods of gender and sexual orientation education. In developing an alternative method, GALE was inspired by an information principle that was called “de-homofiling” in the 1980s by trainers of gay and lesbian peer educators. This principle meant that when young people came up with all kinds of arguments and resistance against homosexuality, questions were asked in return that confronted the young people with their prejudiced and one-sided views.

For instance:

Young male student: If a gay man looks at me, I'll hit him in the face!

Educator: If a girl looks at you, would you hit her too?

This "de-homophilization" can lead to a mild shock reaction in the young people, who suddenly realize that their taken for granted world view (with regard to sexual diversity) is actually not in line with their general values and norms ("if someone likes me, I don't hit them"). Modern scientists might call this effect "visualizing cognitive dissonance". This is the effect GALE wants to achieve.

4. Create cognitive dissonance: the [educational activity GALE developed](#) consists of showing young people various strongly heteronormative images of (superficially seen) men and women, and repeatedly asking "Is this a man or a woman?"

The exercise is introduced with a short trigger video ("[Bob](#)") which points out that expectations about gender can be misleading, followed by a short explanation of the difference between gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual preference using the gender bread person. With this introduction, GALE hopes to make it clear from the outset that the later question "Is this a man or a woman?" cannot simply be answered with a woman *or* a man.

The working method starts with an image of a woman and the question: "is this a man or a woman?" After the question is asked, the next image gives more information about the one being shown. No cisgender heterosexual individuals are shown. Successively, the images turn out to be about intersex people with a female and male appearance, and a trans man and a trans woman. In this way, the reaction is provoked that you cannot automatically assume that someone who looks like a cisgender heterosexual person is really cisgender or heterosexual.

At the end of the educational activity, GALE shows some young people who are less heteronormative, including a girl who scored her gendered feelings for two years and displayed this in an animated graph. From this graph it becomes clear that your feelings masculine or feminine can differ from day to day – if you reflect on them.

Criticism

This educational method has been submitted to various organizations and experts for comment. The method was also presented as an introduction to a module on sexual diversity in an online course for school counsellors on sex education. The method was not always welcomed.

The objections can be summarized as:

- 1) a feeling of unease about asking stereotypical questions
- 2) the fear that asking students such questions will lead to a feeling of being trapped
- 3) the belief that starting the teaching method with stereotyping questions will reinforce stereotyping; this was substantiated with recent advice from Hanneke Felten (MOVISIE) that research shows that information should start with mapping stereotypes and that the information officer must then put in extra energy to refute those initially evoked images and that this focus on stereotypes will actually strengthen stereotypes
- 4) the fear that the teaching method will be too shocking and will therefore provoke resistance; this also raises the question of whether information should at all be provocative to a certain extent, or whether information should avoid any challenge in order to avoid resistance
- 5) resistance to explicitly naming stereotypes without directly contradicting them, because this is not politically correct and therefore discriminatory
- 6) aversion to showing heteronormative images of intersex and transgender people (particularly by activists who see this as emphasizing that intersex and transgender people would only be acceptable if they appear heteronormative)

In the discussions about this, these feelings and arguments often got mixed up, and it was not easy to distinguish between reflection on one's own feelings and objective arguments. It is clear that the proposed method evokes all kinds of emotions. That is also the intention, because the teaching method is intended to appeal to emotions surrounding heteronormativity and should lead to reflection on those emotions, limiting beliefs, and thus should lead to a deeper and "experienced" insight into how heteronormativity works.

The questions are then:

1. Does Hanneke Felten's advice that your education should not start with prejudices or stereotypes apply to this educational activity?

2. Does the method work as intended: evoking cognitive dissonance that leads to an inspiring reflection on gender and sexual preference?
3. Is the impact of the teaching method possibly different for the target group for which it was developed (15-16 year old boys) and for other target groups, such as adult advisors and educators?
4. Is the level of generating cognitive dissonance (which may be accompanied by some irritation or resistance) too high? Is there a risk that students mentally shut down instead of being inspired to reflect? Does this differ per target group?

If possible, we would like to answer these questions through thorough research, and ideally we would like to compare this method with the other three methods mentioned. Unfortunately, there is currently no budget for this. The expert meeting is intended as an initial exploration in order to gain at least a preliminary view of this.

The expert meeting

19 gender experts and grass roots activists were invited to the expert meeting. The method developed by GALE was sent to the potential participants in advance, with the request to study it beforehand. An extensive explanation (which could be read optionally) was sent as an appendix with considerations for the choice and development of the method.

The expert meeting was initially organized on December 22, 2021. The meeting would be online because the Netherlands was in lockdown due to COVID-19. However, there were many cancellations due to people being busy just before Christmas, after which we decided to postpone the expert meeting until January 27. As the lockdown continued, this meeting was also online. Seven participants registered for this, but at the last minute a number of participants cancelled again and there were only four participants (including the organizer) during the online meeting.

A total of 11 interested parties responded to the invitation, some of whom agreed to respond in writing because they were unable to attend the meeting due to other important agreements.

The program was as follows:

1. Welcome, (very) short introduction

2. Video impression of the implementation of the methodology at pre-vocational secondary education Iedersland College and explanation by Daan van Hooff (pre-vocational secondary education teacher/management)
3. A round of feedback from the participants on the tried-out method
4. Short discussion
5. Closing

Introduction

Peter Dankmeijer introduced the meeting with a short explanation of the G.EDU project, about the development of the methodology and the criticism of it. The attendees briefly introduced themselves.

Video-impression pilot

The video clip with an impression of the pilot showed how the students tried to guess whether the depicted person was a man or a woman. Sensing that the question was provocative, one of the students shouted from the start that the woman depicted was probably a man. Another student thought it was a woman, because “you could see this from her high forehead”. The teacher revealed that the woman depicted has an intersex condition, in which she appears to have a female body but she also has male hormones. The students still tried to categorize the depicted person as a certain sex, for example by asking whether she has a vagina or a uterus. The teacher tried to respond to this by answering these questions in an informative way and explaining once again that the difference was in the genetic makeup and in the hormones. The students responded by saying “confused”. It was not clear whether they thought the woman depicted was confused or whether they themselves were confused. The teacher asked about this, but got no answer. She then tried to explain the concept of intersex again.

The teacher then showed the next slide - a slide that had been added to the lesson series by the school itself. It showed a couple of two bearded men, one of whom had become pregnant and had given birth to a baby. The teacher explained that one man used to be a woman, but had left the womb in place, making it possible to still get pregnant. The students again tried to categorize whether this man was really a man or a woman, including by asking whether he had a vagina. One student commented that if you are born with a certain gender, you are stuck with it.

First feedback on the video and the approach

One of the participants noted that the video impression of the pilot was confronting for him, as he is a gender and sexuality activist himself and is used to expressing himself correctly. In the video you can see the young vocational students making oversimplified remarks and making crude judgments. The activist felt confronted with the raw reality in which he does not live on a daily basis. He admitted that he was initially uncomfortable going through the material, but seeing the video impression made him realize that such an approach might actually work well with this target audience.

Peter Dankmeijer noted that the way the teacher handled the material was not quite what he as developer intended. Like many teachers, this teacher tried to accommodate the reactions of the students by providing additional information. But through that informative approach, it was not really possible to come to a creative reflection to reconsider gender as other than a binary.

Peter stated that the methodology is precisely intended to elicit certain emotions, surprise and possible resistance, which are then made negotiable. The students do come up with arguments, but according to Peter those arguments are really just labels for underlying emotions of uncertainty. Peter concludes that applying the methodology requires additional training from teachers, in particular on avoiding giving informative answers, recognizing underlying emotions, and on the ability to deal with them in a pedagogical way.

The deputy director of the school where the pilot took place gave an explanation of the type of school and the type of students where the pilot took place. He also said that about 10 lessons had been given within a week. The video fragment is from the beginning of the lesson series and shows the very first reactions of students. The teachers did notice that at the end of the week the students gradually showed a greater tolerance for different variations in gender and sexuality.

But he also noted that offering one block of ten lessons is actually too much for this target group. As far as he is concerned, such lessons should be better dosed: fewer lessons within a short period, and better spread over different times of the year, or over moments throughout the course. This kind of topic is very new for such students, and you should not overload them with impressions. The growth of their personality is a gradual process, to which the school must adapt. For example, the school plans to revisit some of these lessons, or other lessons from the online gender curriculum in March. With these remarks, he agreed with Jerome Bruner's theory of continuous learning.

Discussion

The discussion focused, among other things, on the extent to which this methodology is well applicable to this target group and this level. The participants had the impression that this approach could work well for these low-educated students, but had doubts about the impact on higher-educated young people or on adults. On the other hand, it was noted that the frailty of cisgender heterosexual adults could yield similar responses, although these might be wrapped up in more sophisticated cognitive arguments.

It was noted that the inclusion of video recording of the pilot is very valuable because the discussion about this methodology and perhaps education about sexual and gender diversity in a broad sense is often conducted on an abstract level. Such visual material makes it clear how things work in practice. This practice does not always match the images and ideals of developers or activists.

The question was asked to what extent the reactions of these students are related to low education or social class, and whether their "biased" reactions are not so much the result of their position, but are created by the type of education and the approach of teachers. which, as it were, impose a class difference on students. The question was asked how middle class teachers can make a good connection with their students, especially if they have different background cultures.

Closing

Peter Dankmeijer concluded the expert meeting by thanking the contributions of the participants. He said that the report will also include comments from other participants who were unable to participate physically.