

Hypothetical story problems in math class such as “Christopher and Stephen are going to Flooring America to buy carpeting for their new home” could remind students that not all relationships are heterosexual ones.

#### **Art, Music, and Theater**

One misconception in society is that GLBT people work primarily in the arts. GLBT people are found in every occupation and profession. They are lawyers, teachers, nurses, scientists and engineers, prize fighters, baseball and football players, and fire fighters.

It is true that the worlds of art, music, and theater have been open and accepting of GLBT people, and thus many famous artists, musicians, and film artists have been openly gay. In studying the biographies of these people, it is important to mention that Michelangelo, Kahlo, Handel, Tchaikovsky, Leonard Bernstein, Elton John, Melissa Etheridge, and Alvin Ailey were or are gay. Once again, just hearing the word mentioned in an accepting tone contradicts the notion that the topic is forbidden or shameful.

Two particular books of stories, songs, poems, and mini-plays allow teachers and students to celebrate diversity by presenting role models of many different races, cultures, classes, genders, abilities, sexual orientations, religions, ages, and appearances. They can be used in classes for readings and prompts to discussion and writing; almost all can be adapted to a readers’ theater format for performance. The first book is *Free to Be You and Me and Free to Be a Family* (1998) by Marlo Thomas and Christopher Cerf and the second is *Cootie Shots: Theatrical Inoculations Against Bigotry for Kids, Parents and Teachers* (2000) by Norma Bowles.

#### **In the Face of Controversy**


What if a parent challenges the inclusion of GLBT people or topics in the curriculum? First, be assured that it will happen! Parents have the right to ask; we have the responsibility to present a response that supports a safe, respectful learning environment for all of our students and families.

My response has always been something like, “I have students of all kinds in my classroom—young adolescents with differing religions, family structures, learning abilities, physical abilities, gender expressions, economic classes, languages, countries of origin, sexual orientations, sizes and shapes—and they all deserve to be validated and respected. It is my responsibility to model acceptance and respect for all members of our community; that’s why everyone is included.”

It took me a while to get comfortable responding to these questions, but I certainly am now, and I encourage you to find the words that work for you.

#### **Conclusion and More to Come**

Invisibility and silence are perhaps the greatest perpetrators of ignorance about and fear of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. When we broaden the curriculum to include GLBT people where appropriate, we combat this invisibility and increase understanding by our students. We give clear signals to all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity or gender expression, that GLBT people are valuable and valued members of society.

In the April issue of *Middle Ground*, we will look at ways schools can work to create and maintain a safe and inclusive environment for all young adolescents: those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning; those who have GLBT parents or other relatives; and all others who limit themselves because of their fears of being on the receiving end of taunts and name-calling because they are different. 



*By Emily Golen*

Sometimes, my eighth graders are just too scared to share their opinions.

There’s something nearly palpable about the pressure to perform, be accepted, and just be cool in the halls of a middle school, and those pressures are hard to shed in the classroom.

“Could the Revolutionary War have been avoided?” I asked one day.

Silence.

I surveyed the room of students with whom I had been discussing the events leading up to the Revolution for about two weeks.

“This is your opinion. You can say yes or no! I just want to know what you think. Could the American Revolution have been avoided—or was it inevitable?”

Students sheepishly looked around the room, nervous to risk embarrassment with the wrong answer or an answer they don’t think I want! If only there were a way they could all share their opinions in a low-risk atmosphere.

There is a way: Wallwisher ([www.wallwisher.com](http://www.wallwisher.com)).

Wallwisher might have transformed a day in which I felt like I had failed my students into a day in which ideas and evidence were jumping off the wall like a bouncy ball. Providing a blank space and virtual Post-It™ notes, Wallwisher creates a forum for low-risk discussion and sharing.

#### **Finding a Voice**

Getting started is simple. Navigate to the Wallwisher website and click on Build a Wall. After entering your name and e-mail, you are able to customize the color and title of the wall. With the default set up, anyone can view or add stickies, so check your privacy settings.

Your wall is ready to share. Now what?

Consider my question about the American Revolution. If I were able to provide a cart of computers for my students and send them to the wall I created for their class period, they could share their ideas with no risk involved—even anonymously.

I know what you’re thinking, and I was initially hesitant about anonymity, too. What about the student who decides an insult would be more appropriate than content, or a joke a better time investment than a thought-provoking question?

Wallwisher has clever privacy options that allow you to limit who can see the wall. As an administrator, you can filter all posts. Assigning posting names for students like Stargirl1424 can allow students to share their ideas publically without their classmates knowing who wrote what, while allowing you to keep track of their thoughts and their progress.


Students are pushed to be succinct. With a 160-character limit, they need to focus their responses before posting. Words are not the end of the line, however; options to post images, videos, and links to other sites are also available via a sticky. This lets students write what they think and provide evidence as needed.

Wallwisher can be a discussion starter. Perhaps your science class is just starting to learn about cell structure and students aren’t confident in the material quite yet. Create a wall and see instant, low-risk feedback from students about questions you pose in class. You are able to find out when students understand the material or when they have misperceptions so you can adjust instruction as necessary.

In math, students could take turns writing out the steps to solve a complicated equation or log in from home and post questions from the homework in a “virtual office hours” setting. You can log on and respond when asked.

#### **A Blank Slate**

Wallwisher provides the space for kids to share privately and publicly, helping them to gain confidence not only as writers but also as learners and thinkers.

What could you use it for? How could your students jump into a discussion in a new way, where they might otherwise be nervous? Make a wall and show kids how to cover it with their thoughts! 

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