Do opposites really attract?

This activity has been adapted from the *Opposite ends of the pole*.

Suggested duration: 35-40 minutes

**Crossroads outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crossroads outcomes</th>
<th>What do we want students to know, understand or be able to do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Critically analyse situations, attitudes and behaviours that influence health, safety and wellbeing in different contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Analyse the relationship between health behaviours and personal beliefs, attitudes and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Evaluate how the varied influences on attitudes and values impact on behaviours.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Crossroads content**

**Personal identity – Owning yourself**

Own identity

- Aspects of identity
  - sexuality
  - self-concept

**Sexuality and sexual health – Owning yourself**

Gender and sexual identities

- Factors that influence gender and sexual identities
  - diversity
  - cultural values
  - social pressures
  - addressing homophobia and transphobia

**Sexuality and sexual health – Responding to others**

Influences on behaviour

- Influences on behaviour
  - personal values
  - social pressures
  - double standards

- Influences of technology and media on sexuality and sexual behaviour
  - challenging perspectives, stereotypes and media portrayals

---

1 Ollis, D, & Mitchell, A, 2001, *Talking Sexual Health: a teaching and learning resources for secondary schools*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University for the Australian National Council on AIDS, Hepatitis C and Related Diseases (ANCAHRD)
Teaching notes

It is important for students to move beyond binary thinking or thinking in terms of opposites. They need to understand that gender is not fixed and that as young people they do not have to comply with traditional notions of what it means to be a young man or a young woman in today’s society. This involves examining their current understandings of what it means to be male and female and how our understandings are shaped by social expectations, relationships and power.

When a person thinks in terms of opposites when referring to sexuality they tend to put labels on people and often make assumptions about a person’s sexuality.

Sexuality is made up of many components and it is not useful to think of sexuality in terms of opposites. This activity provides students with the opportunity to explore the components of sexuality and recognise how an individual’s behaviour and the behaviours of others can be influenced by assumptions and expectations associated with sexuality.

Teachers should be aware that the issues discussed in these activities may be confronting for some students. It is important to establish a safe and effective classroom environment, where ground rules are clearly communicated. It is essential that students are encouraged to listen to and respect the values, beliefs and opinions of others.

Required resources and materials for preparation

- Components of sexuality fact sheet for display or one per student
- Character scenarios and questions sheet – 1 per group of 4-5 students

Activity 1: Binary thinking – is it always useful? (15 minutes)

- Use a continuum to demonstrate examples of binary thinking. The temperature continuum can be used as an example to model continuums.

```
Temperature Continuum

FREEZING   COLD   CHILLY   MODERATE   WARM   HOT   BOILING
```

- Draw a horizontal line on the board and write the word ‘Temperature’ as a heading.
- At one end of the line place the term ‘freezing’.
- Students identify what the opposite of freezing is, e.g. boiling. Record the word at the other end of the line.
- Students fill the continuum space with words to represent temperature between boiling point and freezing point, e.g. hot, warm, moderate, chilly, cold.
- Explain to students that often terms can be placed in a continuum to demonstrate the broad spectrum of something, in this case temperature.

- In pairs, students create their own continuum, e.g. weather, colours/ shades, levels of physical activity. The continuum should represent the broad spectrum of their chosen topic.
o Students record one term at one end of the continuum and then another term that is the opposite at the other end of the continuum.
o Students then fill in the continuum with terms that fit in between the two extremes. For example, terms students may use on a weather continuum may include: hailing, stormy, raining, cloudy, sunny, dry, hot, humid.

- Explain to students:

Sometimes people think in terms of opposites. This is called binary thinking. For example, people might say that the temperature is either hot or cold or the weather is either dry or wet rather than really thinking about the specific situation. In most cases where the concept is simple, like the temperature or weather, this is not a problem because it doesn’t affect anyone else. For more complex concepts, like aspects of identity and in particular, sexuality, binary thinking is not very useful.

- Ask students to discuss the following questions with a partner:
o How would binary thinking define gender? E.g. male and female or masculine and feminine
o How would binary thinking define sexuality? How might someone think in terms of opposites? e.g. straight, gay.
o Why is this not useful when determining someone’s gender or sexuality? e.g. not everyone fits into these labels.

- Following the discussion, invite students to share their discussions. Remind students of the following teaching point.

Binary thinking, or a person who thinks in terms of opposites when referring to sexuality, tends to put labels on people and often makes assumptions about people’s sexuality. Sexuality is made up of many components and it is not useful to think of sexuality in terms of opposites.

Activity two – Components of sexuality (15 minutes)

- As a group, students examine the fact sheet Components of sexuality, which provides an overview of the terms sexual attraction, sexual behaviour and sexual identity.
o Provide students with an example to demonstrate how the components are interrelated and not always the same for one person.
o For example, a person may be attracted to people of the same sex (orientation) but engage in sexual activity with people of the opposite sex (behaviour).
• In groups of three or four, students examine the various character scenarios and complete the table.
  o Groups must indicate how traditional binary or opposite thinking would identify the characters’ sexuality. Students should determine each character’s sexuality by discussing their sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, and sexual identity.
  o Encourage students to use the terms *same sex attracted* and/or *opposite sex attracted* to refer to differences in the character’s sexuality.

Teacher note: Groups may find it difficult to determine the character’s sexuality. This is part of the activity and will add to the richness of discussion in groups.

• In their groups students answer the following questions and then discuss as a whole group:
  o Did traditional binary thinking provide a clear indication of the character’s sexuality?
  o What made it difficult to determine the sexuality of each of the characters? e.g. components of sexuality changed over time, sexual behaviour, orientation and identity were not the same.
  o Is defining a person’s sexuality simple? Why? Why not?

• It is important to debrief the activity by asking students to consider the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Considerations for discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What assumptions are made when people use labels?</td>
<td>Labelling assumes that sexual behaviour, attraction and identity are all the same and don’t change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Teacher note:</em> it is important to recognise that some people’s sexual behaviour, orientation, and/or identity may stay the same for their whole lives while for others these components may change over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do gender expectations contribute to assumptions made about sexuality?</td>
<td>Expectations such as, <em>males are expected to be attracted to females</em>, and <em>females are expected to be attracted to males</em> contributes to the assumption that if you don’t fit this expectation then you must be same sex attracted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Society is challenging assumptions that behaviours that do not fit with ideals of masculinity and femininity are associated with same sex attraction. Gender expectations merely box and label individuals and fail to acknowledge each person’s unique features and strengths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does labelling sexuality influence a person’s feelings or behaviour?</td>
<td>Labelling may result in negative thoughts, feelings and perceptions of self. Where an individual does not meet the expectations associated with a ‘label’ they may change their behaviour in a way that is not true to themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labelling may cause an individual or group to hide part of their identity from others, such as their culture or their sexuality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labelling may cause an individual or group who does not fit into one of the labels to feel like they are ‘abnormal’. This may impact on the mental health and wellbeing of an individual or group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the implications for people who do not exclusively fit into the labels of binary thinking?</td>
<td>The impact of labelling and the resulting feelings and thoughts can include emotional distress, confusion, isolation, exclusion, low self-worth, harassment or ridicule.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where bullying and harassment are a result, this can impact on an individual’s sense of safety. Where people do not feel safe they avoid situations. As a result it may impact on attendance at school, employment, social events or family events, resulting in a loss of connectedness and belonging.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why do you think sexuality is made up of so many components?

Sexuality is dynamic (constantly changing), diverse and different for different people. Sexuality can vary at different times in a person’s life.

| Why do you think sexuality is made up of so many components? | Sexuality is dynamic (constantly changing), diverse and different for different people. Sexuality can vary at different times in a person’s life. |

**Personal reflection (5 minutes)**

- Invite students to complete a personal reflection by considering the things they have learnt from this activity. Students consider:
  - Do I understand the diverse nature of sexuality?
  - Are there still questions that I would like to ask?
  - Have I made assumptions about sexual diversity within the wider community? What was the impact of these on others?
  - Are my personal values supportive of people from a diverse range of sexuality and gender groups?
  - How can I reframe my thoughts and behaviour to be more inclusive of the diversity of others?
Additional resources

Source: It’s pronounced metrosexual

The Genderbread Person is an infographic that breaks down gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation into an easy to understand visual.

The infographic could be used to generate discuss on the weakness of binary thinking for gender and sexuality. It will introduce a range of terms that stimulate more critical thinking from students.
FACT SHEET – COMPONENTS OF SEXUALITY

Sexual attraction – The attraction a person has or doesn’t have to other people. For example, same sex attraction, opposite sex attraction, or attraction to both sexes. Sexual attraction can fluctuate and change throughout a person’s lifetime.

Sexual behaviour – The sexual contacts a person has or the way a person acts sexually. In most cases, sexual behaviour reflects a person’s sexual attraction and sexual identity, but in many cases it does not. For example, a person may identify publicly as opposite sex attracted and have sexual contact with people of the opposite sex but feel sexually attracted to the same sex. Sexual behaviour includes sexual interests and sexual activity, as well as asking questions and having conversations about sexuality and relationships.

Sexual identity - The perception a person has of themselves and the way they present themselves to others. For example, in some cases young people may perceive themselves as same sex attracted but identify publicly as opposite sex attracted.
Character scenarios

**Thanh**
Thanh is a university student who had a two year sexual relationship with her female roommate. When the relationship broke up, she began dating a male student. She has married him and enjoys their sex life.

**Alex**
After an adolescence that included dating and having sex with girls, Alex got a job out in a remote country town. There he developed a close and loving relationship which included sexual contact with another man. When he transferred closer to his home, he began dating women again.

**Paddydeh**
Paddydeh is 30 years old and has only ever had sexual relationships with men. In her last year of high school she was sexually attracted to one of her girlfriends and for a few months fantasised about having sex with her. Since she left high school she has never been attracted to another woman.

**Phillip**
Phillip says, by the time he was seven or eight years old, he knew he was different to other boys. Since adolescence he has been involved in a series of sexual relationships with men. Now middle aged, he has never had sex with a woman, although many of his friends are women.

**Zarita**
Zarita was married for 16 years. During this time she had two sexual relationships with men. She ended her marriage because she fell in love with another man whom she has been with for the past three years. In these three years she has had 3 sexual encounters with other men.

**Joseph**
Joseph is married and has three children. His only experiences of sexual intercourse have been with women. When he masturbates, he fantasises only about men. Joseph talks negatively about men having sexual relationships with other men although he himself is attracted to several of his male friends.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>How would binary thinking label this character's sexuality?</th>
<th>Sexual attraction</th>
<th>Sexual behaviour</th>
<th>Sexual identity</th>
<th>Identify the character's sexuality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thanh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddydeh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarita</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>What factors influenced your decisions when determining the character's sexuality?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thanh</td>
<td>What things did you discuss as a group about the character's life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddydeh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarita</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discuss as a group:

- Did the traditional binary thinking provide a clear indication of the character’s sexuality?
- What made it difficult to determine the sexuality of each of the characters?
- Is defining a person's sexuality simple? Why? Why not?