

Tips for Making Class Welcoming for Trans and Gender-variant Students

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These tips are intended to reduce unintentional exclusionary practices that might prevent trans and gender non-conforming students from performing at their full potential in class.

Classroom Guidelines and Community Standards

Set a tone of respect and critical inquiry. When establishing the guidelines for class, include something like: “It is important that this classroom be a respectful environment where everyone can participate comfortably. One part of this is that everyone should be referred to by the name they prefer, the correct pronunciation of their name, and the pronoun they prefer (like she, ze, he, or they).” Doing this sets a tone for challenging assumptions about people’s bodies, their identities and the ways they present themselves in terms of gender, and also race, ethnicity, class, ability or disability, sexual orientation, and country of origin. This can also encourage critical engagement with the authors and subjects of texts and ideas in our classes.

Roll Call

Avoid calling the roll or otherwise reading the roster aloud until you have given students a chance to state what they prefer to be called.

Preferred Names

Allow students to choose what *name* they prefer to use and what *pronouns* they prefer. Avoid making assumptions based on the student’s appearance or what is on the class roster. A great way to accomplish this is to pass around a sign-in sheet and ask students to indicate these two items in writing.

Pronouns

If you aren't sure of a person's pronoun (and there isn't someone around to let you know), ask, or refer to them by name only. Making a pronoun assumption is the worst option. One way to do this is by sharing your own. “I use the pronouns he, him and his. I want to make sure I address you correctly. What pronouns do you use?” Another way is to ask, “How would you like to be addressed?” This may be challenging at first, but a person who often experiences being addressed incorrectly may see it as a sign of respect and that you are interested in getting it right.

Modeling Behavior

When facilitating a group discussion, ask people to identify their pronouns when they go around and do introductions. This will allow everyone in the room a chance to self-identify and to get each other’s pronouns right the first time. It will also reduce the burden on anyone whose pronoun is often misidentified and may help them access the discussion more easily because they do not have to fear an embarrassing mistake made by another student, a TA or a professor. Model this by saying, “In our introductions, please state your name and the pronoun you prefer. I’ll start: my name is _____ and I prefer male pronouns.”

Previous Names

Avoid using students' previous names or pronouns if you knew them before they made a change, or because those names are on the roster. Well-meaning comments like "I knew Gina when she was Bill," even if meant to be supportive, reveal what might feel like personal information to the student, and unnecessarily draw attention to their trans identity.

Address Mistakes

If you make a mistake about someone's pronoun, correct yourself. Going on as if it did not happen is actually less respectful than making the correction. This also saves the person who was misidentified from having to correct an incorrect pronoun before it is planted in the minds of classmates or anyone else who heard the mistake. As teachers, especially, we must model respectful behavior and keep in mind that students pay especially close attention to the ways we interact with others in the classroom.

Correct Others

Whether in office hours, when speaking with students in groups, or when speaking with faculty and staff, correct others who make a pronoun mistake. It is polite to provide a correction, whether or not the person whose pronoun was misused is present. Allowing the mistake to go uncorrected ensures future uncomfortable interactions. For example, if a colleague uses the incorrect pronoun for a student, simply respond saying, "I think Gina uses female pronouns."

Respect Boundaries

Avoid asking personal questions of trans people that you would not ask of others. Because of sensationalist media coverage of trans people's lives, there is often an assumption that personal questions are appropriate. Never ask about a trans person's body or medical care, previous name, why or how they know they are trans, sexual orientation or practices, their family's reaction to their gender identity or any other questions that are irrelevant to your relationship with them unless they invite you to do so.

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