

Making Classrooms Welcoming for Trans Students

Dean Spade

I wrote up this sheet of tips for professors at my school to use and several other people have asked me for it. It is geared toward law school culture, but may be useful for others as well. I thought I'd post it here in case others can make use of it.

Very Basic Tips for Making Class Welcoming for Trans Students

In recent years, cultural, political and legal resistance to the oppression of transgender people has resulted in greater visibility of the issues facing this population and growing recognition of gender identity and expression discrimination. As these issues gain greater attention, and as obstacles to trans people's participation in education and employment are addressed, we will likely continue to see more trans people coming to law school. These tips may be helpful in ensuring that your classroom is a welcoming place for SU's trans students and that no unintentional exclusionary practices are occurring.

- Do not call the roll or otherwise read the roster aloud until you have given them a chance to state what they prefer to be called, in case the roster represents a prior name.
- Allow students to self-identify the name they go by, whether they prefer "Ms." or "Mr." and what pronouns they prefer. Don't make assumptions based on what is on the class roster or the student's appearance. A great way to accomplish this is to pass around a seating chart or sign in sheet and ask them to indicate these three items in writing, and then use it when you call on them or refer to them in class.
- If a student has an old name they do not use that you are aware of because you knew them before they changed it, or because it is on the roster, do not use it or reveal it to others. Well meaning comments like "I knew Gina when she was Bill," even if meant supportively, reveal what might feel like personal information to the student, and unnecessarily draw attention to their trans identity.
- Set a tone in the classroom of respect. At the beginning of each semester when establishing the guidelines for class (don't surf the internet while in class, do the reading, etc.) include something like: "It is important that this classroom be a respectful environment where everyone can participate comfortably. One part of respectful behavior is that everyone should be referred to by what they go by. This means it is important to pronounce people's names correctly, to refer to them by the pronouns they prefer, etc." Add in whatever guidelines respect you see as important, but include pronoun usage since people are often unaware of the issue. You can hand out the attached pronoun etiquette sheet to students if you want to give them more information on the issue.
- 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 assumption that has now been planted in the minds of classmates or anyone else who heard the mistake. As professors, especially, it is essential that we model respectful behavior.
- Whether in office hours, when speaking with students in groups, or when speaking with faculty and staff, when someone else makes a pronoun mistake, correct them. It is polite to provide a correction, whether or not the person whose pronoun was misused is present,

in order to avoid future mistakes and in order to correct the mistaken assumption that might now have been planted in the minds of any other participants in the conversation who heard the mistake. Allowing the mistake to go uncorrected ensures future uncomfortable interactions for the person who is being misidentified.

- Never ask personal questions of trans people that you would not ask of others. Because of the 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, their old name, why or how they know they are trans, their 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 or voluntarily share the information.
- If you meet a student outside the classroom in a setting where they did not already get to self-identify via your seating chart, and you are not sure of the proper pronoun for them, ask. One way to do this is by sharing your own. "I use masculine pronouns. I want to make sure to address you correctly, how do you like to be addressed?" This may seem like a strange thing to do but a person who often experiences being addressed incorrectly may see it as a sign of respect that you are interested in getting it right rather than making assumptions. If you are not sure and do not want to ask, you can also avoid using pronouns—but making a pronoun assumption is the worst option.

Taking it Further

If you want to take your awareness of these issues further, here are some additional ideas to consider.

- Educate yourself about trans history, trans law, and trans resistance. There are wonderful resources on the internet, in addition to many law review articles and books of all kinds. Some great resources for trans law information include the Transgender Law and Policy Institute (www.transgenderlaw.org), The Transgender Law Center (www.transgenderlawcenter.org), the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (www.srlp.org), and the TGI Justice Project (www.tgijp.org).
- Include trans issues on your syllabus, and help your students learn how to talk about these issues respectfully and understand their importance. Important trans legal struggles can be found in tax, trusts and estates, family law, employment, civil rights, criminal law and criminal procedure, administrative law, poverty law, housing, public benefits, torts, etc. These cases might be a chance for students to familiarize themselves with the obstacles facing a community that is severely underserved by the legal profession.
- Think about how gender norms, or ideas about what men and women should be like, might be being enforced in your classroom or in other parts of your life. What does it mean to stand up against the rules of gender, both in the law and in other areas of our lives? How might we be enforcing gender norms on our selves or our loved ones with well-meaning advice or guidance? Exploring these questions can deepen our commitment to gender self-determination for all people and to eliminating coercive systems that punish gender variance.

Pronoun Etiquette

People often wonder how to be polite when it comes to problems of misidentifying another person's pronoun. Here are some general tips:

- 1) If you make a mistake, 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 assumption that has now been planted in the minds of any other participants in the conversation who heard the mistake.
- 2) If someone else makes a mistake, correct them. It is polite to provide a correction, whether or not the person whose pronoun was misused is present, in order to avoid future mistakes and in order to correct the mistaken assumption that might now have been planted in the minds of any other participants in the conversation who heard the mistake.
- 3) If you aren't sure of a person's pronoun, ask. One way to do this is by sharing your own. "I use masculine pronouns. I want to make sure to address you correctly, how do you like to be addressed?" This may seem like a strange thing to do but a person who often experiences being addressed incorrectly may see it as a sign of respect that you are interested in getting it right.
- 4) 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 the chance to self-identify and to get each others' 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.

Comments

I realize this applies way less to law school...but in so many other classes, it might be relevant: In class activities, don't separate into groups by gender (e.g. - all the women will be on debate team A, and all the men on team B).

also, in language classes (especially when it is a more gendered language than English, such as Spanish, Arabic, etc.), the same guidelines you outlined regarding pronouns need to apply to any statements that would indicate a student's gender. For example, being addressed with the wrong gender of verb or adjective is just as humiliating as being addressed with the wrong pronoun.

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 the chance to self-identify and to get each others' 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.

Can we reaffirm that facilitators in pronoun-go-rounds should be ready to address cis privilege? I have experienced cases where cis participants throw off flippant answers about how evident their pronouns are (i.e. "female/feminine/male/masculine, of course" or similar sorts of comments).

Yes, non-trans people can have really problematic responses to these go-rounds when they aren't use to them or don't understand the point. Frequently I find people who are not trans will make a joke of it or will say they don't care which pronoun is used for them in a way that implies "look how cool and flexible I am" without understanding the privilege that can make that a very different statement for them than for a trans person whose gender identity is regularly ignored, mistaken or punished (kind of like when non-trans people in trainings I do report that they have used the "wrong" bathroom on occasion because a bathroom had a long line and it was fine for them, not realizing that a person who is trans appearing or gender non-conforming appearing gets a very different response when entering bathrooms than a non-trans appearing person entering a "wrong" bathroom because of a particular circumstance). Thanks for pointing this out!

21 January 2010 @ 01:55 pm

<http://cruciferous.livejournal.com/15984.html?view=133232#t133232>