

Gender Identity and Pronouns in the Classroom



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Gender Identity and Pronouns in the Classroom



- Gender Identity
- Introductions: Names and Gender Pronouns
- Respecting Gender Identity and Pronoun Usage
- “They”
- Misgendering
- Strategies to overcome misgendering
- Resources

Gender Identity



- We exist within a binary gender system
- We are assigned one of two genders at birth and are expected to act accordingly
- The norms of gender are so pervasive that they seem to have always been there: natural, normal, unquestionable
- We navigate the imposition of fairly strict gender codes
 - Bathroom, Clothing, Toys, Pronouns
- We are all producing gender all of the time
 - Dress, Hair, Body Language, Occupy space, Expectations, Institutions
- We break gender norms in everyday life as well
 - Nurturing fathers/Women Engineers

Gender Identity



- When we break expectations of gender it is noticed and there can be consequences
 - Dads caring for their kids in the world get compliments and accolades
 - Powerful women leaders face being demonized and resented
 - Think back to a time in your life when you pushed the boundaries of gender, when you defied expectations
 - ✦ How were you disciplined by family, teachers, friends, peers back into the gender norm
 - What would happen if a man wore a skirt to work or a woman shaved her head?
 - ✦ We would have a story about that, it wouldn't go unnoticed

Gender Identity



- We move from the principle that the gender assigned at birth does not determine gender identity
- Gender is more like a spectrum than a binary
- Non-binary Gender – what exactly is that?
 - “Woman” and its expectations do not fit
 - “Man” and its expectations do not fit either
 - One’s gender exists outside of the binary system
- Gender Fluidity – how does that work?
 - Embracing the space between instantiated gender polarities and occupying the overlaps, gaps, and blurred areas
 - Recognizing that gender binaries are poles and that we move back and forth between those poles throughout our days, years, and epochs that make up a lifetime

Gender Identity



- Those whose gender identity is consonant with the gender assigned at birth are described as being “cisgender”
- Latin Roots
 - Cis/on this side of
 - Trans/on the other side of, across, beyond
- Those of us who are cisgender experience gender privilege because of this consonance
- Ciswomen still experience gender oppression (wage gap) that can be compounded by nationalism, ableism and racial, class, and religious oppression
- It is important to recognize cisprivilege nonetheless (i.e. bathroom, travel & identification)
- At a women’s college gender should be simple – right?

Gender Identity at a Women's College



- Our students have the benefit of living and maturing during a time when we understand that:
 - we have more than two genders
 - gender is not fixed but flexible
 - gender norms are able to be resisted and defied
- Students are exploring and understanding their gender during their years at Smith
- Every Smith student may not identify as a woman

Introductions: Names and Gender Pronouns



- After being enrolled some students may transition and begin identifying as trans and use he/him pronouns or they/them pronouns
- Some students may not identify as women or as trans
- No gender category may feel right
- They may identify as gender queer or non-binary and use they/them pronouns
- They may use another identity marker like ze (she/he/they) & hir (her/him/them)

Introductions: Respecting Names and Gender Pronouns



- **Getting to know your students:**
 - pass around a sign-in sheet rather than call out names – new names may not be listed with the registrar
 - Invite students to say their names and their gender pronouns so that you and their classmates will learn the correct appellation and pronoun
 - Some students may be in the process of settling on these modes of address and might not feel comfortable with this public expression, make the pronoun element of the introduction optional
 - *Preferred* gender pronoun can imply that one's gender is a preference rather than a fact of being – asking for everyone's "gender pronoun" is sufficient

Respecting Gender Identity and Pronoun Usage



- Many students will email before class or speak with us after class to be sure that we know their names and pronouns, which is always appreciated
- Some students may not be so bold. If I'm unsure I ask the student what their gender pronoun is in a conversation after class or during office hours, so as not to embarrass them or put them on the spot during class
- Making the effort to learn student's pronouns is just as important as learning their names

“They”



- The use of the plural pronoun “they” enables people who are not cisgender to use a pronoun that is not tied to gender
- “They” also attends to the plurality of gender
- This may take getting used to
- It is vital to get used to it
- Using the correct pronoun demonstrates that we care, that we are paying attention, that we respect our students and their process of growing and maturing and becoming themselves

Misgendering



- Mistakes are inevitable
- When we say the wrong pronoun it is important to correct it, in the moment if possible
- Don't give up – keep working to make the adjustment
 - Our students feel so disheartened if a professor never tries to use the correct pronoun or gives up because it is uncomfortable or too difficult
- Students rarely see us grow and learn so this is an excellent chance to model growing through difficulty with patience and persistence

Strategies To Overcome Misgendering



- Acknowledge that misgendering happened
- Express that you are trying
- Ask for patience as you learn
- Perhaps offer an apology
- Understand if the student doesn't want to discuss it
- Really work to use the correct pronoun
- Remember that this is a vital way to respect our students as individuals, as brilliant young people, as human beings coming into their own

Resources



The Basics: Trans 101

- <https://www.smith.edu/ssw/student-life/resources-and-support-students/trans-gender-nonconforming-resources/basics-trans-101>

Smith College Gender Policy

- <https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/diversity/gender-identity-expression>

Resources



Dean Spade. “Mutilating Gender,” 2000.

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Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton Eds. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017