

Pitt[®] Social Work

Gender Diversity and Pronouns

Overview

The following content and linked resources have been curated as a primer for instructors to better meet the needs of transgender and non-binary students in our Social Work classrooms. This resource is broken into three sections:

- 1) Why Pronouns Matter
- 2) Making Mistakes
- 3) Making Your Classroom More Inclusive of Trans Students

Throughout this document, we use trans and transgender and gender diverse to refer to a wide range of gender identities including binary transgender identities (i.e., trans woman, trans man) and transgender identities that fall outside of the binary.

Language to describe the diversity of gender identities is always evolving. It is important to mirror the language that students use to describe themselves. Some of these identities may include:

Non-binary

Genderqueer

Gender nonconforming

Genderfluid

Two-Spirit (this is a term that is specific to indigenous populations in North America)

Agender

Bigender

Note: Non-binary should not be considered a third gender. There are students who may not identify with the binary gender system and who do not identify as non-binary. Additionally, people who are not cisgender, will identify as a woman or man who had a transgender experience rather than a transgender man or woman.

For an evolving list of gender identities see:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_gender_identities.

Goals

- 1) To explain why respecting your students' gender identities matters.
- 2) To familiarize instructors with trans-inclusive language and appropriate comportment to model for their students.
- 3) To assist instructors in creating a safe and inclusive environment for transgender and gender-diverse students.
- 4) To provide concrete resources for instructors to implement in their course and syllabus design.

Implementation	These resources are best reviewed before the planning phase of course design, so the instructor has ample time to (1) consider how they will implement trans-inclusive pedagogy, (2) work through any discomfort they may have and (3) seek additional support or training if needed
Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Because we have grown up learning to gender people based on internalized visual and cultural norms, it takes a great deal of intentional practice to stop relying on norms in the ways we gender the people we encounter. You will make mistakes along the way, but you will make fewer mistakes with practice. 2) While mistakes are a normal part of the process, those mistakes can still cause harm. Spend time practicing using students' pronouns and thinking through how to respond when you make mistakes to best limit the harm to misgendered students. 3) It is common to feel uncomfortable when we are asked to change the way we speak, act, or think, especially when it is something as foundational to our worldview and self-view as gender often is. We may feel fearful of making a mistake or guilty if we do misgender someone. Give yourself space to process those feelings without letting your initial reaction impact the way you treat students.

Section 1: Why Pronouns Matter

Because gender is so deeply woven into our upbringing and socialization, it can be one of the most internally difficult aspects of our worldview to challenge. And because **gendering** (the social assignment or designation of a person's gender, usually on the basis of perceived sex) is often a key aspect of our interactions—from the use of pronouns to the social scripts we've internalized—the way we think about gender is constantly on display through our words and actions. This leaves people we encounter susceptible to our perspectives on gender.

People who are **cisgender** (meaning, people who were assigned sex and gender at birth that is in agreement with their self-designated gender) have the privilege of having their gender affirmed through the normative ways people address them, such as through gendered pronouns, honorifics (Ms., Mr., sir, ma'am), and other gendered words applied to them (woman, man, wife, husband, etc.). When cisgender people are **misgendered** (meaning, they are referred to in a way that does not affirm their self-designated gender), it is an anomaly, and any offense they take at being misgendered is socially validated.

People who are **transgender** or **gender diverse** (meaning, people who were assigned sex and gender at birth that is *not* in agreement with their self-designated gender) frequently experience having their gender negated through misgendering. Any offense they take at being misgendered is often invalidated, dismissed, mocked, or even responded to violently. The routine invalidation of trans people through misgendering contributes to a culture that punishes and dehumanizes transgender people for existing.

With the prevalence of anti-trans violence and homicide, it is imperative that we all commit to humanizing and validating the genders of transgender and gender-diverse people. As instructors, we have a further responsibility to create a space in which our students feel safe, valued, and respected, as these are crucial conditions for engaged learning. A good starting place is to commit to using appropriate pronouns inside and outside of the classroom. Push yourself to not make assumptions about which pronouns a person uses. Instead, create conditions for students to share their pronouns at the beginning of the semester.

While there are many pronouns a person may choose to go by (and all should be diligently used when a student designates them as their pronouns, regardless of your familiarity with them), the **most common pronouns** you are likely to encounter are:

He/his (singular, usually masculine specific)

She/hers (singular, usually feminine specific)

They/them (singular, the most common gender nonspecific pronouns)

Ze/hir (singular, gender nonspecific pronouns)

Some students may prefer no pronouns and may request that you use their name when you speak about them in the third person. Other students may use multiple pronouns (e.g., she/her and they/them or any pronoun). There is a difference between students who do not have a preference about which pronouns are used and students who want to be referred to using multiple pronouns.

Students may also change their pronouns (e.g., at the beginning of the course they use he/him pronouns, but they later want to be referred to as they/them).

If there is a need for an honorific (such as on a letter of recommendation or...), some students prefer a gender neutral title such as Mx. (usually pronounced "mix") rather than Ms. or Mr.

**Further Viewing
and Reading on
Pronouns**

[A Resource on Gender Inclusive Language at Pitt](#)

[“Pronoun Etiquette”](#) by Dean Spade (Note – Ensure that students know that they do not have to share their pronouns if they do not want to. See guidance in section 3)

www.pronouns.org

Section 2: Making Mistakes

Avoiding misgendering entirely is of course preferable, but even with the best intentions, we sometimes mess up. Until you become practiced at using pronouns that are dissonant with your assumptions about a person's gender, you are likely to make mistakes, and how you respond to them is important. In the moment we make a mistake, we might become embarrassed, defensive, dismissive, or even angry. Those feelings are normal but can cause more harm than the initial mistake if we react to them. It is important to use a student's designated pronouns both in your interactions with them and when referring to them when they are not present.

When you make a mistake and misgender someone, you should do four things:

- 1) **Apologize.** A simple, "I'm sorry" will do. This is not a good time to express your embarrassment or explain why you misgendered them. Simply saying "I'm sorry" acknowledges that you recognize you made an error, and you regret any harm your error might have caused.
- 2) **Correct yourself.** Again, keep it brief. If you used "she" to refer to a student who has designated "he" as his pronoun, simply say, "I meant 'he,'" and move on.
- 3) **Do better.** Students are likely to understand that mistakes are human, and the habits of deeply engrained gendered language are difficult to unlearn. But if you repeatedly misgender your students, it sends the message that you do not respect them enough to put in the necessary effort. It is important to practice using correct pronouns for students outside of your interactions with them. You can practice in your head, in the mirror, while making dinner. If your brain is taking time to adjust, give it time outside of the classroom.
- 4) **Center their feelings.** If the person you misgendered seems noticeably upset, follow-up with them in private. Again, this is not a chance for you to be defensive or focus on your guilt or how hard this is for you. Nor is it appropriate to ask the student to explain why your mistake upset them. You want to avoid putting the student in a position in which they have to prioritize your feelings and needs over their own. Make your follow-up about their needs and how you can best support them.

Responding to mistakes in this way creates an opportunity to restore trust and safety for your trans students, and affirm their gender, even in light of your mistake, by acknowledging that your mistake was a mistake.

When a student makes a mistake and misgenders someone, correct them. If it happens more than once, speak to them privately about their mistake and explain why it is important that they respect the designated pronouns of their peers. It may be appropriate to follow up with the student who was misgendered to let them know that you are taking steps to address the problem and check in about what would feel supportive.

Further Reading on Pronouns

["Etiquette about accidentally misgendering trans people"](#) Things of Things

Section 3: Making Your Classroom More Inclusive of Trans Students

In addition to using the correct pronouns, there are several ways to make your classroom more inclusive:

- 1) **Pronouns 101.** Make sure that your students are familiar with what pronouns are before suggesting that they share their pronouns. A brief introduction that simply states, “pronouns are the words we often use to refer to someone when we are not using their name – this could be they/them, she/her, he/him, ze/hir.” A good web resource for students is www.pronouns.org.
- 2) **Give students the opportunity (but do not require it) to tell you the name and pronouns they want to be used in the classroom *before* you call attendance or use a pronoun for them in class.** The University of Pittsburgh allows students to change their name in PeopleSoft (which updates Canvas and Pitt Email) and specify their pronouns in Canvas, do not assume that all students have done this.
 - a. **Have students fill out a “getting to know you” form on the first day or over email before the first day of class.** The form can include a line to indicate the name on record with the university, the name they want you and their peers to use, and the pronouns they designate for use by the people in this class. Make clear that you will take attendance with this form (or using name tents).
 - b. **Introduce yourself with your pronouns.** (ex: “My name is Alex, and I use he/his pronouns”), and then give students the option to do the same. Let them know that if they do not share their pronouns you will refer to them by their name and will not use pronouns. This normalizes the practice of introducing oneself with pronouns, instead of making it something only trans students have to do. It also sets up an expectation that everyone in the class should commit to using each students’ designated pronouns.
 - c. **Have students make nametags or name tents and ask them to include their pronouns if they are comfortable doing so.** This can help build cognitive links between the student, their name, and their pronouns. You can use these to take attendance by bringing them to every class and having students pick them up at the start of class and return them at the end. This way, you do not have to call out student names and you can see their names and pronouns throughout class.
 - d. **If using web-conferencing for an online course, have students add their pronouns to their names.**
- 3) **When appropriate, include trans issues and content by trans people in your course.** Many course topics can have a significant impact on trans people. Including trans voices and issues in your syllabus demonstrates a valuation of the experiences and contributions of trans people. Make sure that you do your homework and are knowledgeable and comfortable with this content before presenting it.
- 4) **Make your course policies and language trans-inclusive in your syllabus.**
 - a. **Consider including ground rules about respecting designated pronouns and gendered language.**
 - b. **Include resources that will be helpful for trans students in your syllabus or Canvas page, such as:**
 - i. The location of the nearest gender-inclusive restrooms, and a link to the gender-inclusive restroom map: [Single Occupancy Restrooms on Oakland Campus](#)
 - ii. [Instructions on updating user identity and account information](#)
 - iii. [Gender Inclusive Housing](#)
 - iv. [Pride at Pitt](#)

Resources for Trans-Inclusive SW Classrooms

[CSWE Resource on LGBTQIA2S+ Microaggressions in Social Work Classrooms](#) (Note – has particularly strong resources for what to do when mistakes are made.)