

Trans* Inclusive Teaching Practices

Almost every aspect of schooling is based on the belief that there are only two genders and two sexes and that these align for all students. In schools, this is reflected in our buildings, language, and practices. It shows up in the prevalence of washrooms and change rooms for boys and girls, often-used classroom phrases such as “boys and girls,” and classroom and school-wide practices such as separating students by gender in the sports they are allowed to play, the behaviour that is expected of them.

However, gender is a cultural construction that is specific to time and place. The dominant Western definitions of what is feminine and masculine have changed over time and other cultures have different definitions which themselves have shifted over the years. An often-cited example is that blue and pink were not associated with gender until around the mid 1910's¹. On Turtle Island (North America), many Indigenous nations had more than two genders, encompassing people who had different roles in the community. Today, many of these are captured by the English umbrella term two-spirit.

The idea that everyone's gender matches with their sex assigned at birth is called cisnormativity. This kind of thinking is everywhere in our society and in our schools are requires us to think about our assumptions in order to be more inclusive in our teaching practices.

Attendance, Introductions, and Pronoun Go Arounds

One practice that makes assumptions about gender is attendance/introduction practices. At the beginning of the year, many teachers take attendance by calling names from class lists. Unfortunately, this tells students that this document is a greater authority on their lives than they are. In the case of trans* students, they may be using a different name than the name that was given to them by their family or the name that is still on official documents. If they have decided not to share their old name, taking attendance in this way may out trans* students against their will. A way of avoiding these problems is to allow students to introduce themselves. This respects students' agency and puts them in control of what they share with their classmates. Teachers can provide opportunities for students to let them know if their official documentation does not match the name that they use by including a section indicating their official document name on introductory forms often used in classes which give students an opportunity to share ways that they learn best and other details about themselves (see Appendix G for example). Teachers can also use this as an opportunity to offer support to students who may wish to have the name on their official documentation changed.

This can also be the start of critical conversations about what students wish shared with their peers, administration, other teachers, and their families/caregivers. Teachers should respect their students' decisions about what they disclose to whom and in a number of school boards

¹See Jeanne Maglaty's article, When Did Girls Start Wearing Pink, at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/when-did-girls-start-wearing-pink-1370097/>

are required to respect those decisions by board policy. For example, the Toronto District School Board's Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Independent/ Non-Conforming Students and Staff can be found [here](#).

However, asking students to introduce themselves does not challenge cisnormativity by itself. In dominant Canadian culture are ideas about what men and women look like. Based on these ideas, many of us make assumptions about a person's gender based on the way they look and act. For many people, both trans* and cisgender, these assumptions do not hold true and the experience of someone making assumptions about one's gender can be very painful. One way to avoid making these assumptions is to ask a person how they would like to be addressed; this includes their name and the pronouns that the speaker should use. In the context of a entire class, teachers can ask students to share what pronouns they would like used in speaking about them as part of their introduction. Guidelines for facilitating this are provided below.

Arrange students in a circle. Model an introduction for students that includes pronouns and give them the opportunity to share theirs (see prompts below). Be sure to mention that people often change how they would like to be addressed. A person who has attained a new qualification or position (e.g. academic degree, political office) may wish to be addressed in a certain way in certain situations (Doctor, Honourable, Professor, etc.). People may also decide they'd like to be addressed with different pronouns (they, zie, he, she). See attached guide for less common pronouns and how they are used.

It is also important to highlight the privilege of cisgender and gender-normative people, people whose gender aligns with their assigned sex and people who dress and act in ways that are expected for people of their perceived gender. Some students who carry these privileges may be uncomfortable with sharing their pronouns. It is important for teachers to acknowledge that students may feel this discomfort but make them aware that sharing their pronouns is a small way to challenge cisnormativity and transphobia, systems that harm us all. See prompts below.

Prompt: "My name is [teacher name] and my pronouns are ____ and ____."

E.g. "My name is Vivek and my pronouns are she and her."

"I'm Alejandro and I use they, them pronouns."

"My name is Omoye and I use he, him pronouns."

"I'm Martin and my pronouns are zie, and hir."

After everyone has had a chance to introduce themselves, end with a class discussion.

Discuss

- Why might it be hurtful to gender someone incorrectly?
 - Connect the relevance of this topic to transgender folk.
- Can we tell a person's gender just by looking at them?
- How can we find out how to talk about someone in a way that feels right for them?