

Common Challenges to Gender-Inclusive Teaching and Some Evidence-Based Solutions

There are several common challenges to gender-inclusive teaching. While these challenges often manifest differently across disciplinary contexts, they all arise as obstacles to disrupting the long-standing misconceptions of gender as a binary construct. In the following subsections, we discuss twelve challenges that can arise when cultivating a gender-inclusive classroom environment. We interweave the discussion of the challenges with research-based practices meant to address the issues.

Fluency with Gender Non-Binary Vocabulary

Cultivating a gender-inclusive classroom environment requires a familiarity with an array of concepts related to gender identity and expression. Consequently, efforts to promote a gender-inclusive environment require both consciousness raising and learning opportunities for students and leaders in the classroom. In particular, there are several conceptual distinctions that are crucial to understand when working to construct a gender-inclusive classroom.

Sex assigned at birth versus gender identity

Individuals often conflate sex assigned at birth with gender identity. However, these terms are distinct. Sex is assigned at birth by a medical practitioner, and is largely determined by physical attributes such as external genitalia, sex chromosomes, sex hormones and internal reproductive structures. Sex assigned at birth is binary (male/female). Gender identity, on the other hand, is an individual's internal sense of their gender which may or may not match the sex that they were assigned at birth.

Gender identity versus gender expression

While gender identity and gender expression can be related, they do not have to be. Gender identity is individuals' internal understanding of themselves as it relates to gender. Gender expression, on the other hand, is how individuals express their gender through clothing, demeanor, etc. How one expresses their gender is not necessarily related to their gender identity. Gender expression may be a way individuals play with external gender performance and explore roles, while gender identity is an interior sense of self. Both can be fluid and change over the course of one's life, and they need not change together.

Sexual identity versus gender identity

Individuals often conflate sexual identity and gender identity. Sexual identity refers to individuals' romantic and sexual attraction to others, or lack of attraction (asexual identity). Gender identity describes individuals' internal understanding of themselves as it relates to gender. Sexual identity is a separate concept that refers to an individual's sense of romantic and/or sexual attractions.

GLSEN, an organization that works to support and affirm LGBTQ+ youth, provides a useful [infographic](#) and [discussion guide](#) that provides additional information on gender and gender terminology.

Familiarity With and/or Commitment to Gender Non-Binary Topics

Topics related to non-conforming gender identities

Some students and leaders in the classroom may have limited prior interactions with transgender and/or non-binary individuals. Consequently, instructors and students may be unfamiliar with the experiences of non-binary and/or transgender people. These experiences may include (but are not limited to): feeling anxiety when using public restrooms; feeling disrespected when others make assumptions about their gender, name, and pronouns; feeling unsafe in learning spaces on campus; and experiencing high levels of discrimination and harassment. Importantly, as previously noted, some leaders in the classroom personally identify as non-binary and/or transgender, and their experiences in the classroom are unique.

The following provide a more detailed explanation of transgender and/or non-binary individuals' anxiety about using public restrooms, thoughts about the intent of those who misgender them, and perceptions of safety on college campuses.

Even those who already have a more extensive knowledge of topics related to gender inclusivity may not entirely understand the impact of gender identity and expression on non-binary individuals. For example, they might not understand how other dimensions of individuals' social identity (i.e. socioeconomic, religious, race, etc.) converge with their gender identity, and affect how others perceive them.

Learning about non-binary identities

Students may exhibit considerable variation in their commitment to learning about non-binary gender identities. Variation in students' commitment may be rooted in lack of familiarity with non-binary individuals, ideology, culture, or religious background, and may lead to discomfort when engaging course materials that include the voices and experiences of non-binary individuals. This discomfort may be rooted in fear, shame, disgust, frustration, confusion, etc.

Clark, Rand, and Vogt (2003) observe that students may sometimes hold onto their current understanding of gender roles "like lifelines in class discussion" when confronted with information that challenges their existing views (2003, 3). According to the authors, this occurs because these critiques may threaten students' "sense of self" and, as a result, be perceived as an "attack" (Clark, Rand, Vogt 2003, 3).

Respecting the identities of non-binary individuals

Both students and instructors may exhibit varying levels of prior experience engaging with topics related to gender identity and expression. For those who lack experience, it may seem unclear how to ask others about their gender pronouns in a respectful manner or how to intervene when someone has been misgendered.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's website offers a guide about pronoun usage that can be found [here](#).

Other gender affirming practices include:

- Only call roll or read the class roster aloud after providing students with an opportunity to share with you the name and pronouns that they use and those they want you to use in the class.
- Allow students to self-identify their name and pronouns. Remind students that they can indicate their pronouns on YES.
- Set a tone of respect the first day of class as part of the course expectations and connect this discussion with honoring one another's names and pronouns. Model this by including your name and pronouns with the class on the first day.
- Acknowledge when you've made a mistake about someone's pronoun and correct yourself.
- If a student shares their gender identity with you, do not disclose the student's gender identity to others unless you have obtained their consent. Note that some students will be comfortable with some names and pronouns in particular spaces, and different names and pronouns in other spaces.
- When/if you have obtained such consent, honor students' names and pronouns in all university settings including (but not limited to): office hours, classroom, student group meetings, or when speaking with other faculty or staff, unless the student indicates settings in which they would like you to use a different name or pronoun.
- Honoring students' names and pronouns includes making sure that other people use the correct name and pronoun for that student. If someone else misgenders a student by using an incorrect name or pronoun, politely provide a correction whether the person who was misgendered is present or not.

Do not ask personal questions of transgender and/or non-binary people that you would not ask of others. Such questions include inquiries about the person's body or body parts, medical care, former name, why or how they knew they were transgender and/or

non-binary, their sexual orientation or practices, their family's reaction to their gender identity, or any other questions that are irrelevant to the classroom context unless the student explicitly invites these questions or voluntarily offers this information.