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about Gendered Bodies

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# Some Very Basic Tips for Making Higher Education More Accessible to Trans Students *and* Rethinking How We Talk about Gendered Bodies

By Dean Spade

In recent years, resistance to the cultural, political, and legal barriers facing trans people has gained greater attention. As trans resistance grows, we will increasingly see trans people making demands for access to education.

In this two-part essay, I offer tips for addressing obstacles to trans students' classroom participation and for avoiding unintentional exclusionary practices. In the first part, I suggest guidelines for referring to students by their preferred names and pronouns. In the second, I address people who talk about bodies, within and outside classrooms, suggesting ways to avoid implying that gender is defined by body parts.

## I. Some Basic Tips for Making Classrooms Welcoming for Trans and other Gender Nonconforming Students

- + Do not call the roll or otherwise read the roster aloud until you have given students 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 and what pronouns they prefer. Do not make assumptions based 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 items in writing—as well as whether they prefer Mr. or Ms. in contexts using that formality, like law schools—and then use it when you call on them or refer to them in class. In smaller groups, you can do a go-around on the first day where people state what name and pronoun they would like to be called in class.
- + If you are aware of a student's former name that they do not use, either 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. If they want to

share their former name or trans history or identity with others, they can do so, but others should not share those for them.

- + Set a tone of respect. At the beginning of each semester when establishing the guidelines for class (do not surf the internet while in class, do the reading, be punctual) 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 includes pronouncing people’s names correctly and referring to them by the pronouns they prefer.” Add in whatever guidelines for respect that you see as important, but make sure to include pronoun usage since people are often unaware of the issue. I present at the end of this section a pronoun etiquette sheet that you can use if you want to give students more information on the issue. Keep in mind that some students, even at the graduate level, do not seem to know what a pronoun is and you may need to use an example by saying something like, “For example, I prefer to be referred to as ‘he/him.’”
  - + 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. It is essential, especially as teachers, that we model respectful behavior.
  - + Whether in office hours, when speak-
- ing 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.
- + If you are in a situation where you realize that your students may not be out as trans in all contexts, avoid unintentionally outing them. That means, if your students are out at school but may not be out to their parents, child welfare system caseworker, or others, avoid pronouns when you run into them with those people in another context. Making sure you are providing a safer space in the classroom may mean that your students come out in that space before they are out in other spaces that are less safe.
  - + 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 at work and in other areas of our lives? How might we be enforcing gender norms on ourselves 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.

### **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 studies, and trans resistance. There are wonderful resources on the internet, in addition to many journal articles and books of all kinds.
- + Include trans issues on your syllabus, and help your students learn how to talk about these issues respectfully and understand their importance. Be certain that you are well-educated before you do this. Avoid including these issues in a way that is sensationalist. Be sure you are including texts written by trans authors, and that what you share in class does not limit representation to white trans people with wealth, using texts that center the experiences of trans people of color, trans immigrants, trans people with disabilities, queer trans people, and poor trans people.

## **Sample Pronoun Etiquette Handout on the next page**



**a handy sheet to share  
with colleagues  
or students**

# Pronoun Etiquette

by Dean Spade

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 as 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.

## II. About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts

From my understanding, a central endeavor of feminist, queer, and trans activists has been to dismantle the cultural ideologies, social practices, and legal norms that say that certain body parts determine gender identity and gendered social characteristics and roles. We have fought against the idea that the presence of uteruses or ovaries or penises or testicles should be understood to determine such things as people's intelligence, proper parental roles, proper physical appearance, proper gender identity, proper labor roles, proper sexual partners and activities, and capacity to make decisions. We have opposed medical and scientific assertions that affirm the purported health of traditional gender roles and activities and that pathologize bodies that defy those norms. We continue to work to dispel myths that body parts somehow make us who we are (and make us "less than" or "better than," depending on which we may have).

Yet feminists and trans allies still sometimes (often inadvertently) prop up these sexist and transphobic ideas just by using language that is shaped by biological determinism. This occurs even in spaces where people have gained some basic skills around respecting pronoun preferences, suggesting an increasing desire to support gender self-determination and to abandon certain expectations related to gender norms. I still frequently hear people who I know are committed to dismantling gender norms use terms like "female-bodied," "male body parts," "biologically female," and "bio-boy."

At the same time, I have heard many smart trans people and allies demonstrate

the use of alternatives to language that is invested in the myth of biological binary gender. I share some of these alternatives below. I would like to see them adopted not just in academic contexts but by all people who talk about bodies and role model how to talk about bodies including health practitioners, teachers, and exercise instructors.

1) We can talk about uteruses, ovaries, penises, vulvas, etc. with specificity without assigning these parts a gender. Rather than saying things like "male body parts," "female bodies" or "male bodies" we can say the thing we are probably trying to say more directly, such as "bodies with penises," "bodies with uteruses," "people with ovaries" and skip the assumption that those body parts correlate with a gender. Examples: "Unfortunately the anatomical drawings in this book only represent bodies with penises and testicles, but I think this picture can still help you get a sense of how the abdominal muscle is shaped." "People with testicles may find this exercise easier with this adjustment." "Some people may feel a sensation in the ovaries during this procedure."

2) The term "internal reproductive organs" can be a useful way to talk generally about ovaries, uteruses, and the like without calling them "female reproductive organs." Example: "The doctor might think it is necessary to have some ultrasounds of the internal reproductive organs to find out more about what is causing the pain."

3) We can use "people who menstruate" or "people who are pregnant" or "people who produce sperm" or other terms like these rather than using "male," "female" or "pregnant women" as a proxy for these statuses. In this way we get rid of the

assumptions that all people who identify as a particular gender have the same kind of body or do the same things with their bodies, as well as the mistaken belief that if your body has/does that thing it is a particular gender. Examples: “This exercise is not recommended for people who are menstruating.” “People who are trying to become pregnant should not take this medication.” “People who produce sperm should be warned that this procedure could affect their fertility.”

4) When we want to talk about someone and indicate that they are not trans, we can say “not trans” or “non-trans” or “cis-gender” rather than “biologically male,” or “bio boy,” or “bio girl.” When we talk about someone trans we should identify them by their current gender, and if we need to refer to their assigned gender at birth we could say they were “assigned male” or “assigned female” rather than that they are “biologically male” or “biologically female.” These “bio” terms reproduce the oppressive logic that our bodies have some purported biological gendered truth in them, separate from our social gender role. Our bodies have varying parts—it is socialization that assigns our body parts gendered meaning.

5) If we know we are going to be talking about bodies, taking the adjectives “male” and “female” or “masculine” and “feminine” out of our vocabularies for describing body parts or systems can help us avoid alienating or offending the people we are talking to. This may help improve access to whatever we are offering people who are often alienated from much needed health services as well as from opportunities for organized physical and educational activities.

As we all know, lots of people’s bodies do not fit the rigid story about “biological sex.” They include trans people, genderqueer people, people with intersex conditions, people who cannot or choose not to reproduce, non-trans women who have had hysterectomies, non-trans men who do not have testicles, and many others. Many people will benefit from our efforts to dismantle the gendered language about bodies that enforces harmful norms. Taking these gendered framings off of application forms and intake forms and making sure that the “gender” question on such forms is a blank space where people can write what they want rather than check a box, are also important steps for improving access. I am sure that depending on the context in which we are talking about bodies, other phrasing might be useful, but I believe that we can talk in ways that get out of compulsory gender assignment of these body parts and reflect our rejection of the notion that binary gender is “natural” or pre-political. Listening for other examples of good use of language to move away from these assumptions is always a pleasurable part of my own project. I highly recommend it. We each tend to be most expert in the bureaucratic systems and communication norms of the institutions we deal with and work in daily. Those are ideal places for us to start spotting gender norm enforcement and dismantling it.