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Taking Care with Pronouns in the Classroom

Emily O. Gravett, *James Madison University*

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Misgender

It's common these days, you may have seen, on academic conference name tags or at the bottom of email signatures, to indicate one's pronouns--not "preferred" pronouns, since this isn't some kind of preference, but rather just an identity a person holds, like any other. It's happening in other work spaces too. The public declaration of pronouns emerges out of a concern that we may incorrectly assume and use someone's pronouns, thereby misgendering them, which can result in feelings of alienation, exclusion, exhaustion, invalidation, marginalization, invisibility, or worse.

Articles, posts, and university websites (such as this one) will sometimes suggest that instructors ask students to go around in a circle (a "pronoun round" or a "pronoun go-around") and indicate their pronouns in front of the whole group early on in the semester.

The intentions of pronoun disclosure (like so many on-campus diversity and inclusion efforts) are, of course, good. It is intended as a form of inclusion. It is intended to foster a sense of belonging. It is intended to signal to members of the transgender community that such spaces, in the words of my campus, are a "safe zone" for those whose sex assigned or registered at birth may be different than their identified gender. Since research shows how "trans* students are forced to develop skills and strategies for navigating a collegiate environment that continues to be shaped without them in mind" (Nicolazzo, *Trans* in College*, 2016), asking

about pronouns is thought to be one small practice that eases their way.

There are concerns, however, with the exercise of going around the room (actual or virtual) and inviting people to share their pronouns. As one Harvard student wrote, this practice “can actually harm the community it’s intended to support.” For some, pronouns may be a private matter. Some students may be “out” as trans to their friends or family, but not ready to share this information with just anyone else—people like peers and professors they don’t necessarily know or trust. Some students may, of course, not be out to anyone at all! Some students may be in the process of a transition and not sure yet which pronouns they would like others to use. Some students may not actually identify as trans, even though others in the room might make such assumptions (based on limited notions of how different genders are supposed to look or behave). Some students may feel the exercise draws attention to them; they may feel spotlighted or singled out, which can be uncomfortable and stressful. Some students may not feel, despite the exercise being framed as an invitation, that they can really decline (since doing so may invite scrutiny and further assumptions). Whatever answer is given in the go-around may immediately place a person in a box, a box that inevitably fails to capture the full person and their complexity. There may not be a learning environment created yet in which it feels safe to disclose this kind of information. One common justification for the exercise is that “when only trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people share pronouns, it makes it easy for them to be targeted and harrassed.” But, of course, if transgender people are going to be targeted and harassed, this could very easily (more easily?) happen once they’ve publicly revealed this information, whether or not others have too.

This ritual has been called, by some trans critics, a “performance.” Paradoxically, it may privilege those for whom pronouns are “easy” or “settled”—cis folks whose gender and sex align—and further “other” trans folks. Like many other so-called acts of inclusion, it may simply make those of us in the dominant group feel like we’re being good allies, with the accompanying self-pats on the back, when we are simply not doing much to help at all. Think of the Instagram black squares in purported support of Black Lives Matter, whose “performative allyship” resulted in the “the memeification of social justice activism and no substantial progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Plenty of pieces, like this one, talk about actual needs (e.g., medical and economic) that the transgender community cares quite a bit about.

Yet I still find myself not wanting to misgender my students! It seems like such a low-hanging fruit in terms of basic decency. Though I understand that, for many trans folks, someone accidentally using the wrong pronouns (when the intention is there and good) is not really a “disaster”—and can usually be remedied by a simple apology and changed future action—I still would like to proceed with care and a focus on forming good relationships from the get-go. So, what is there to do?

One way I’ve solicited pronouns, while avoiding some of the problems of the circle strategy, is on a “getting to know you” questionnaire that I require students to fill out as their first assignment. They get full credit simply for completing it. The questionnaire asks many

questions, mostly about why they chose my class, their prior experience studying religion, how their current position toward religion may help AND hinder their learning, and so on. This is an assignment they turn in to me only (though it seeds in-class activities), so there is no forced public disclosure. However, I do indicate on the form that I plan to use these pronouns to refer to students in class, so the pronouns would become public, if a student decided to disclose. That way, everyone can make the best decision for themselves about whether they want this information out there. This is actually an adjustment I made to the form, after learning that this intention wasn't clear. Originally, I didn't state why I wanted to know this information or how it would be used. That's inclusive teaching for you. Always a learning process! And, even with this information, I have accidentally misgendered students before, so being equipped with the correct information isn't any guarantee we won't cause harm. But it does make it just a bit easier.

Now, what else can we do, beyond the bare minimum, to ensure our classrooms and other learning environments are as inclusive and welcoming and caring as possible, for trans students and all others?

<https://wabash.center/2023/07/taking-care-with-pronouns-in-the-classroom/>