

LESSON PLANS

Reader Idea | Creating an Inclusive Classroom by Offering Pronoun Choice

By JACQUELINE MAXWELL and THE LEARNING NETWORK SEPT. 13, 2017

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How do you handle gender issues in your classroom? How are they treated schoolwide?

Does your school district, like New York City's, explicitly state that "Every student is entitled to be addressed by the name and pronoun that corresponds to the student's gender identity that is consistently asserted at school"? Does it insist that teachers and other school staff be made aware of and honor a student's request to be referred to by the name and gender that corresponds to that identity?

Below, a high school teacher in Massachusetts describes how her school worked to find the best way to support students who identify outside of the gender binary, or who don't subscribe to traditional labels.

Please share your own ideas in the comments. And if you would like to suggest a Reader Idea of your own, tell us about it here.

Idea: A Times article helps a high school faculty group make recommendations for a new schoolwide approach to the use of gender pronouns.

Teacher: Jacqueline Maxwell

School: Wellesley High School, Wellesley, Mass.

Grade level: 9-12

Why we chose it: We hear from thousands of students around the world each week via our many interactive features, and we've been struck by how passionate teenagers are on issues of gender and identity. As this teacher writes, "Young people are not only starting a gender revolution, they are leading the way — and it is in our best interests to listen." This piece offers practical advice about how to do just that.

What Ms. Maxwell did and why, in her own words:

How, in 2017, can I best support my students and prepare them for the world beyond the bubble of high school?

Given the tensions of the current political climate, now more than ever many educators feel the importance of starting the school year by fostering an inclusive classroom, as well as by showing students the value of empathy and critical thinking, both inside and outside of school.

As our world is changing around us, our students are speaking out about who they are and how they identify, and many of the terms they use are new to educators. Young people are not only starting a gender revolution, they are leading the way — and it is in our best interests to listen.

The start to an answer about how to create an inclusive classroom might begin with just one word: a pronoun.

First step: A faculty discussion group makes recommendations to the school at large

In the summer of 2016, I worked with a group of educators at Wellesley High School to consider how best to support and welcome students who identify outside of the gender binary, or don't subscribe to traditional labels.

We used the 2016 New York Times article “She? Ze? They? What’s In a Gender Pronoun” to help start our project.

As Jessica Bennett notes in the piece, in order to use a person’s pronouns, “you need to have at least some knowledge of the identities to which they correspond — beginning with an understanding of the word ‘identity,’ along with its sister verb, ‘identify.’” Our first order of business, therefore, was giving our students an opportunity to self-identify.

Our group created a student survey that asked students how they identify, and a faculty resource with suggestions about how to create safe spaces in the classroom, using recommendations from our school’s Gay Lesbian or Whatever (GLoW) Club.

Because sharing one’s pronouns aloud can make students feel vulnerable, we decided to ask these six questions in a written survey and follow up with individual conversations where appropriate. Here is what we asked:

1. What name do you want me to call you in class?
2. Please write your name phonetically.
3. How do you identify racially?
4. What is your pronoun?
5. What pronoun do you want me to use when I address you in front of other students?
6. If there are other things you’d like to talk to me about, please let me know.

The survey and the faculty resource, titled “He, She, Ze: A Guide to Supporting All Students,” was distributed to the staff by our principal, in the hope that teachers would incorporate our questions into their own surveys at the beginning of each school year.

In addition, we recommended that staff members post signs that encouraged safe spaces, using posters such as the popular gender unicorn, similar to the Genderbread Person prominently featured in National Geographic Channel’s

“Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric.” We also included some general recommendations for educators, which can be found in a list at the bottom of this page.

At the end of our summer work, we made recommendations to our administration about how to continue our work with diversity and inclusivity. This included sharing our recommendations with the entire district, finding more ways for our students to self-identify, and working to change some of the binary systems that we currently have in place.

Second step: Changes in email signatures and grammar lessons

One small but powerful acknowledgment of a nonbinary world is the email signatures many of us adopted.

As Elizabeth Reis, a professor of gender studies at the City University of New York’s Macaulay Honors College, explains in her Times Op-Ed, “Pronoun Privilege,” those of who are cisgender do not have to worry about someone using the wrong pronoun to address us, especially in a public setting. One way that educators have shown respect for others’ identities is simply by including their own pronouns in their email signatures — by, for example, simply putting “she/her,” or “they/them,” in parentheses after the name.

For me as an English teacher, changing pronouns meant a change in teaching pronouns — specifically, the singular “they.” As a Times piece called “Who’s They?” puts it: “We are witnessing a great explosion in the way that human beings are allowed to express their gender identities. We are also hearing a lot of awkward conversations. What are we supposed to ... call everyone?”

At last year’s National Council of Teachers of English conference in Atlanta, Ga., I attended a panel discussion called “Progressive Pronoun: The Question of Singular They” (Page 116 of this PDF) which presented the current debate about whether or not to adopt the pronoun in this form:

The N.C.T.E. itself hasn’t decided whether or not to formally adopt the singular “they,” but you can read a discussion about the issue in this 2015 blog post from the

organization, “The Singular ‘They’ — When Pronouns Get Personal.” The audience of educators that day also seemed torn, not because they weren’t open-minded, but largely because of the fact that standardized testing hasn’t changed to account for the use the singular “they.” The presentation showed some of the debate between prescriptivist grammar and inclusive language, and one of the speakers noted that by using the singular “they,” we are also promoting inclusivity of gender variant groups, such as people who are nonbinary, agender, genderqueer or transitioning.

I agree with many who spoke that day that any grammar confusion is outweighed by making an individual feel accepted. Therefore, I’ve chosen to adopt the singular “they” when teaching about pronouns and I remind students to allow the use of the singular “they” when peer-editing, as well. Even if “they” is not officially adopted in all forms of journalism or education, the use of traditional pronouns is changing, so it only makes sense to start the conversation now.

While we work to queer some of the potentially harmful, traditional norms with the help of students and the administration, our departments are also working to offer more diverse courses, in which students can pursue their own interests while also participating in difficult conversations in safe spaces. For example, I am piloting a “Beyond the Binary: Gender and Sexuality in Literature” course this fall. Offering more curriculum choices for high school students, we believe, gives them more opportunities to explore their own identities and develop thoughtful, informed ideas about the world around them.

Some recommendations from our school’s staff survey, GLoW club and the N.C.T.E. conference on creating an inclusive classroom

- Give your students an identity survey at the start of the school year.
- Ask students their pronouns. Know that pronoun use is not a “preference,” so don’t ask which one students “prefer.” Acknowledge that you may mess up as you adopt new language, but don’t be afraid to try.
- Accept the singular “they/them/their” in written assignments.

- Put up signs that let students know you want to create safe spaces for them.
- Be mindful about how you address groups of students by using gender-neutral language. Create and enforce norms that promote respect in order to have difficult conversations.
- Don't shy away from tense or difficult conversations; they are necessary for progress and a great way to model empathy in the classroom.
- Be clear that in your classroom, racial intolerance, religious intolerance, and intolerance based on sexuality or gender will not be accepted. Let it be known that homophobic and transphobic language is absolutely not allowed. Speak up when you hear it.
- Let the students lead, and learn from them.
- Include texts that reflect human diversity and challenge heteronormativity.
- Ideally, provide narratives with positive outcomes for historically oppressed groups.

Related Resources

GLSEN | [Pronouns: A Resource for Educators](#)

[Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center | Gender Pronouns](#)

[Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education | Safe Schools Program for L.G.B.T.Q. Students](#)