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Pronoun Privilege

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My fall classes started recently, and I had to face the pronoun question. It's simple for me: My appearance matches my preferred pronoun, so I don't worry about anyone misstating it. But some of my students are transgender or gender nonconforming, and they want to announce how others should refer to them. Or do they?

At some colleges and universities, it's common for students to introduce themselves, whether in class or in student group meetings, by name, followed by a string of pronouns. "I'm Lizzie; she/her/hers," for example. I find the exercise discomfiting, but not because I don't want to know the students' pronouns. It's because this ice-breaking ritual, in my experience, is easy only for those for whom the answer is obvious. It can "out" or isolate others, particularly those who are still considering their gender or who have just begun to transition.

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When we go around the room in class, students visibly react when they hear that someone they thought looked male goes by female pronouns or vice versa. This happened in my class a few years back. All eyes fell upon this person as if to ask, “If you identify as female, why don’t you try to look the part?” My heart went out to this student, who later told me that she was just beginning to think about her transition and hadn’t yet started to publicly change anything about herself, other than her name. She looked like any other guy in the class, except she had adopted a traditionally female name and used female pronouns on this day when asked.

This is the kind of student for whom we might think the pronoun exercise would be perfect. Once she identified herself, no one would accidentally mis-gender her in class. But in fact, as the student explained to me later, having to say her pronouns in a room full of strangers terrified her. She would have preferred to state her female name and leave it at that. If we had done traditional introductions, some of the students would have put two and two together and assumed she was transitioning; others might have thought she had an unusual name for a guy; some might have thought she was gender queer and comfortable with a male appearance and a female name; and yet others would have shrugged their shoulders and thought, “Whatever.”

With this experience in mind, I decided to adopt a compromise solution for this semester: I explained my concerns and said that students should list their pronouns along with their names only if they were so inclined. I also said that as a class we will refer to one another by our first names (community building) or the pronoun “they” (grammar evolves!). This strategy seemed to work. Half of the students disclosed their pronouns and the other half just introduced themselves in the standard way. No one became the object of scrutiny.

Divulging one’s gender through an announcement of pronouns at best

contradicts the reality that our gender may be ambiguous, and at worst forces students to reveal a potentially vulnerable part of themselves. There are other ways to get to know one another as the semester unfolds.

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