

Best Practices for LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Classrooms

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A note on the authors: All authors identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community and are sharing here about their experiences as social work educators or students. All authors contributed equally to the creation of this document and are listed alphabetically.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQIA+) students are present in your classrooms at MSU Denver, even if they do not to openly share their identities. Creating a welcoming and empowering learning environment is critical to supporting the success and wellbeing of these students, and is an essential area of competence for social work educators. Through modelling inclusive language, examples, and dialogue surrounding LGBTQIA+ identities, you can create increased safety for students of those identities while at the same time supporting the development of cultural competence in all students. The Human Rights Campaign (2018) report on LGBTQIA+ youth found that only 26% of youth surveyed regularly felt safe in the classroom. Our aim is for LGBTQIA+ students to not only be included in MSU Denver classrooms, but for them to feel welcomed and affirmed in these spaces in order to support them in achieving their goals. It takes a combination of education, self-reflection, and intention to create a learning environment which does not other or tokenize students of marginalized identities, and we hope that this document will provide a foundation for continued learning. Creating welcoming and affirming classrooms will support LGBTQIA+ students, and it will also support cisgender and heterosexual students by providing understanding and skills to competently engage with this population in their future practice.

This document provides some important considerations and recommended practices for helping to cultivate a learning environment where all students feel welcome, validated, and included. It will walk you through ideas on how to include LGBTQIA+ individuals in the classroom before classes begin, on the first day, and throughout the semester. In addition to our thoughts on this subject, we have created a resource list of additional information and materials about gender pronouns, LGBTQIA+ inclusive practices, and self-reflection activities which can support you in your personal growth in this area. While we have focused this analysis on inclusivity for LGBTQIA+ students, it is important to note that taking a more comprehensive lens that includes race, class, gender, immigration status, and other marginalized identities should be an ultimate goal for creating an inclusive class experience.

Thank you for taking the time to plan an inclusive and affirming educational experience for LGBTQIA+ students.

Before the first day

Prepare for the first day of class with these suggestions:

- Familiarize yourself with different pronouns and practice using them (see resources at the end of this document to get started!).
- Consider emailing students prior to the first day of class to ask students the names and pronouns they use so that you will have this information at the ready. (This method does not provide a mechanism for sharing this information with other students).
- Consider preparing students for an upcoming conversation around gender pronouns via email.
- For face-to-face courses, prepare how you will ask for introductions that include pronouns in the classroom.
- When setting up a course in Canvas, include your pronouns when introducing yourself to your students.
- Include LGBTQIA+ campus resources in the Student Wellness Resources section of the class Canvas course.
- Consider how class activities may need to be adapted to meet the needs of LGBTQIA+ students.
- Be proactive about integrating LGBTQIA+ content into the curriculum.

First Day of Class

The first day of class, whether in person or online, will set the tone for the remainder of the semester, especially for students with marginalized identities. Considering these ideas and taking these steps will set everyone up for success!

- Assume there are LGBTQIA+ students in your class, whether they are visible or not.
- On the first day of class, provide an opportunity for students to introduce themselves with the name and pronouns they use. You can model this through your own introduction, (e.g., “My name is Alex Robinson. Please call me Professor Robinson or Dr. Robinson. My pronouns are she, her, and hers.”)
 - Avoid making assumptions about students' gender identities. Always ask all students what pronouns they use, not singling anyone out. People of any gender presentation can use any set or combination of pronouns to refer to themselves.
 - You may wish to provide some additional context when inviting students to share their pronouns. For instance, you could emphasize that your classroom is a place where all identities are respected, and that you do not want to make any erroneous assumptions about others' identities.
- Do not read names from the roster out loud. These names may not match the names students use and doing so could inadvertently *out* someone as trans or non-binary. As an alternative, ask students to introduce themselves using their names and pronouns and then check that against your official course roster. If there are discrepancies between the official course names and student names during introduction, then you can follow up with the students individually after class in-person or via email.

- If the strategy above does not work for your course because of class size or topic, one of these alternative and/or additional strategies may be helpful:
 - Have students write their names and pronouns on notecards during introductions, as an ongoing resource for students and faculty. When using Zoom for classes, ask students to add their pronouns to their display name (do this for yourself, as well!).
 - In online classes, you add names and pronouns to the requirements for an introductory post. In some ways, because we do not regularly see one another in online formats, it is easier to understand how we might make assumptions about one another's gender identities.
 - In face-to-face classes, pass around a seating chart or sign-in sheet with columns for students to write in their names and pronouns. (Note, however, that this method does not provide a mechanism for sharing this information with other students).
- If doing introductions that include sharing about identities, such as “intersectional introductions” make sure to let students know that they can share what they’re comfortable with.
 - Introductions that include identities can feel like they force students to out themselves. For example, if everyone in the class is sharing that they are cisgender, a transgender student may feel that they are required to share their gender identity with the class, which may not feel safe to do on the first day of class (or ever!).
 - If you are facilitating this type of introduction, be prepared to hold the classroom as a safe space for all people of marginalized identities, and be willing to hold students accountable to using correct language and not trivializing the identities of others. For example:
 - A student sarcastically states that their pronouns are “it and it’s,” and some of the other students laugh. It is important to engage with this student and remind them that pronouns are an important way of feeling seen and accepted, and that making a joke out of it can be harmful and make others feel unsafe or unwelcome. Invite them to try again.
 - If someone skips over sharing their pronouns, you may prompt them by asking “and what pronouns would you like me to use for you?” or “would you like to share pronouns?”. If a person decides not to share pronouns after a prompt, move forward with the class.
 - If a student shares that their pronouns are they/them/theirs and another student comments “well you don’t *look* transgender,” remind the class that people with non-binary identities are not required to look a certain way.
- For face-to-face classes, let students know where the closest gender neutral bathroom is. (There is a map of these provided by the LGBTQIA+ Student Resource Center).

Ongoing Classroom Considerations

After the first day of class, it is important to continue to make your classroom a welcoming environment and provide learning experiences and materials which are inclusive of LGBTQIA+ identities. Your language, materials, and activities are all areas to consider and adjust as needed.

Language

There are many ways in which the language we use on a regular basis, and with no ill intent, can cause discomfort or make invisible LGBTQIA+ identities. Becoming aware of these speech patterns and having the willingness to correct yourself and others are simple yet profound practices for affirming identities. Here are some examples of common ways in which language can be shifted with intention and practice:

- Avoid referring to students as “Mr.,” “Miss,” “ladies,” “gentlemen,” “sir,” “guys,” or using gendered language. Good replacements are “folks,” “everyone,” “students,” “class,” and “you all.”
- In addition to pronouns, be aware of other ways in which you use gendered language in the classroom. Here are some examples and alternatives:
 - Brother or sister → sibling
 - Husband or wife → spouse or partner
 - Father or mother → parent
 - Latino or Latina → Latinx
- Try to specify if you are speaking about cisgender people as well as specifying when you speak about transgender people. This challenges the assumption that all people are cisgender unless otherwise stated. (A related example is to be explicit when the people you are talking about are White or Caucasian, thus challenging the assumption that Whiteness is the norm unless specified.)
- Avoid making generalized statements about “all men” or “all women.” When speaking about pregnancy, for example, remember that not all people who can get pregnant are women (e.g., transgender men and non-binary people with uteruses) and not all women (e.g., transgender women) are capable of pregnancy.

A special note on pronouns:

- Pronouns are important. While it may seem trivial, pronouns and gender identity are an integral part of how we perceive ourselves. Being validated and affirmed in our identities can support us in feeling seen, valued, and safe. Conversely, regular mis-gendering (the experience of being called by a gendered word or pronoun that one does not identify with) can lead to feelings of low self-esteem, lack of trust and openness, and other emotional responses which affect how we show up in the classroom.
- Pronouns are not ‘preferred’ - they simply are. Avoid asking for “preferred” pronouns when inviting people to share their pronouns. Saying ‘preferred’ suggests that the pronouns are not valid or real, but that you are humoring them.
- Using alternative pronouns takes practice! Get used to using the singular “they” when gender is not specified or necessary. An easy way to practice this is by referring to anyone who has not specified their pronouns as “they,” or to practice with pets or other non-human creatures.
 - Worried about the singular “they” being incorrect grammar? Good news! “They” has been added to the dictionary as a singular pronoun, and the 7th Edition of the APA supports the use of singular “they,” as well.
- If a student talks to you privately about their pronouns or identities, ask them if they would like you to use their pronouns around others. Respect their privacy by only sharing that information with their consent.

- Once a student has shared their name and/or pronouns, these should be used consistently throughout the course in written materials, class discussions, etc.
- If you make a mistake with a name, pronoun, or other gendered term, apologize to the individual, correct your mistake, and move on. Making a big deal about messing up makes everyone more uncomfortable. Example: “Sierra said that she - I mean they, sorry - would like to present first today.”
- If a student in the class makes a mistake with a name, pronoun or other gendered term, it is your responsibility as the instructor to address this directly with the student. In a larger group discussion, this can be a quick statement reminding the student about the correct pronouns/name. In an online discussion, you might consider emailing the student separately to give them an opportunity to correct their language. Similarly to when you make a mistake, correct the student and move on to minimize discomfort for the student who was called by the wrong name/pronouns.

Assigned Readings/Audiovisual Materials

Not only is attending to your own language important for achieving a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment for LGBTQIA+ students, but the materials that we are asking students to take in (e.g., readings, videos) are also critical. In examining your class materials we suggest:

- Making sure that materials that discuss sexual orientation and gender identity are integrated across the curriculum, rather than relegated to one module or week. Each component does not have to be extensive to provide additional complexity and nuance to students’ understandings of LGBTQIA+ identities.
- Make sure that required readings and/or videos attend to the diversity of experiences within LGBTQIA+ communities. For example, the needs for transgender clients/communities will be different than the needs of individuals in same-sex relationships. Even in courses that do not focus on LGBTQIA+ issues should provide content on these identities that reflect the complexity and nuance of difference within these communities.
- Learn more about the authors of your readings/videos, and particularly of their identities (when possible). Providing content from authors who reflect the identities that they are speaking about is a great way to lift up scholars and activists who are often marginalized. It is best to learn about an identity from someone with personal experience with that identity whenever possible (while remembering that one person’s experience does not speak to all experiences of that group).
- Don’t be afraid to include some non-academic content in your course materials (e.g., blogs or social media) as is fitting with your course goals. Because of the ways that privilege shapes who is able to contribute to scholarly knowledge, we are likely missing important practice insights by only incorporating scholarly knowledge. Popular press readings or videos can be a great supplement to more academic sources of knowledge.

While we have focused this analysis on auditing your course for LGBTQIA+ content, we believe that taking a more comprehensive lens that includes race, class, gender, immigration status, and other marginalized identities should be an ultimate goal for creating an inclusive class experience.

Classroom Activities

Social work as a field considers family structure, identity development, relationships, community, and culture. There are a number of ways in which educators can normalize and affirm LGBTQIA+ identities and prepare heterosexual, cisgender students to work with these populations effectively. While much of the existing literature does not acknowledge these identities, faculty can normalize including these topics in the classroom. Here are some areas to consider:

- Genograms - Social workers love genograms! When assigning genograms in your classes, recognize that there are not existing symbols and representations for some LGBTQIA+ identities. Instead of expecting your students to ask for clarification or ignore their identities for the purpose of this exercise, engage the class in a discussion about this and collaborate to design symbols to represent non-binary, asexual, pansexual individuals and lesbian, gay, or non-monogamous relationships.
- Case examples are used in just about every social work class. It can be easy to default to “Joe and Jane Smith” as your characters, yet this is a great opportunity to work in LGBTQIA+ relationships. Use examples which include a transgender person, a family with two moms or two dads, or an asexual adolescent. Normalize including these identities as every day occurrences. Integrate these examples beyond when the focus is on gender/sexuality.
- Consider race and ethnicity in the context of case examples and role plays, as well. Mix up the names that you use to include diversity. Make sure that if you are naming when a person is Black or Latinx that you are also naming when a person is White.
- Role plays are another opportunity to include LGBTQIA+ identities. Again, make this part of the norm, not only when you are studying a special topic of gender and sexuality.
- Visuals in learning materials can be easily mixed up to include examples of marginalized populations. When you create handouts or powerpoints, add photos or images of LGBTQIA+ couples and families, as well as images of racially diverse people and ability diverse people. This will help students normalize the diverse clients that they will see in their social work practice.
- Avoid segregating or grouping students by sex, gender, or other identities.
- Remember, no student should be asked to speak on behalf of their identity groups.

Overall, it is important to include materials and dialogues about LGBTQIA+ people and other marginalized identities. When considering literature or research, invite students to consider which identities are represented and which ones are left out. Invite discussions on asexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, and kink. Chances are that your students will engage with clients of all of these identities in their professional lives, and it will be helpful for them to have the experience of having these conversations in the classroom.

Continued self-reflection

None of us are immediately perfect at this--even those who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. As social workers and educators, it is critical for us all to engage in ongoing reflection and development on issues relating to LGBTQIA+ identities. In the resources section, we provide some additional opportunities to learn more about how to examine our own unconscious biases, how to engage in inclusive teaching practices, opportunities to learn

more about on campus and community resources for LGBTQIA+ students, and readings that can help deepen our understandings of LGBTQIA+ issues. We suggest that engaging in an intentional and proactive plan for ongoing growth and development will support you in gaining these skills and creating a welcoming and affirming classroom environment for your students.

Resources

Thank you for taking the time to read through this document and to further consider how to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom, to the benefit LGBTQIA+ students as well as heterosexual and cisgender students. In the following sections we provide additional resources that may be helpful to your learning and ongoing self-reflection.

If you'd like to talk further about creating inclusive learning experiences for LGBTQIA+ students, feel free to reach out to Dr. K Scherrer (kscherr3@msudenver.edu) or others in the Department or University community with expertise on these issues.

Resources for personal reflection and professional development:

- Implicit bias tests on transgender identities and sexuality:
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>

Resources for gender pronouns:

Gender Pronouns

Please note that these are not the only pronouns. There are an infinite number of pronouns as new ones emerge in our language. Always ask someone for their pronouns.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Example
She	Her	Hers	Herself	She is speaking. I listened to her. The backpack is hers.
He	Him	His	Himself	He is speaking. I listened to him. The backpack is his.
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves	They are speaking. I listened to them. The backpack is theirs.
Ze	Hir/Zir	Hirs/Zirs	Hirself/ Zirself	Ze is speaking. I listened to hir. The backpack is zirs.

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transstudent.tumblr.com
facebook.com/transstudent
twitter.com/transstudent

For more information,
go to transstudent.org/graphics

Trans Student Educational Resources

Pronouns-- A How To Guide

Subject: ___¹___ laughed at the notion of a gender binary.

Object: They tried to convince ___²___ that asexuality does not exist.

Possessive: ___³___ favorite color is unknown.

Possessive Pronoun: The pronoun card is ___⁴___.

Reflexive: ___¹___ think(s) highly of ___³___.

The pronoun list on the reverse is not an exhaustive list. It is good practice to ask which pronouns a person uses.

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1	2	3	4	5
(f)æ	(f)æer	(f)æer	(f)æers	(f)æerself
e/ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
he	him	his	his	himself
per	per	pers	pers	perself
she	her	her	hers	herself
they	them	their	theirs	themself
ve	ver	vis	vis	verself
xe	xem	xyr	xyrs	xemself
ze/zie	hir	hir	hirs	hirself

Readings on LGBTQIA+ inclusive pedagogy:

- Case, K. A., Stewart, B. and Tittsworth, J. (2009). Transgender across the Curriculum: A Psychology for Inclusion. *Teaching of Psychology*. 36(2): 117–21.
- Gender Pronouns | LGBT Resource Center. (n.d.). Retrieved January 8, 2018, from <http://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>
- Schmalz, J. (2015). “Ask Me’: What LGBTQ Students Want Their Professors to Know. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/article/Ask-Me-What-LGBTQ-Students/232797> (February 24, 2016).
- Spade, D. (2011). Some Very Basic Tips for Making Higher Education More Accessible to Trans Students and Rethinking How We Talk about Gendered Bodies. *Radical Teacher*, 92 (1), 57–62.
- Teaching Beyond the Gender Binary in the University Classroom. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://wp0.vanderbilt.edu/cft/teaching-beyond-the-gender-binary-in-the-university-classroom/>
- The Problem With Pronouns. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/the-problem-with-pronouns>
- Rankin, S. R. (2006). LGBTQA Students on Campus: Is Higher Education Making the Grade?, 3:2-3, 111-117, DOI: 10.1300/J367v03n02_11
- Teaching Tolerance <https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/TT-LGBTQ-Best-Practices-Guide.pdf>

Additional Resources for On-Campus or in community:

- MSU Denver LGBTQ Student Resource Center
- MSU Denver Preferred Name Change Policy
- Gender Institute for Teaching and Advocacy
- Center for Teaching Learning and Design
- The Center
- Transgender Center of the Rockies