

Setting the Tone: Why Asking for Pronouns Isn't Enough

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INTRO

A growing body of literature explores strategies to create anti-oppressive and affirming university classrooms, as well as the impact of the classroom environment on marginalized students and their learning (Lawrence, 2005; Lee & Ho, 2010; Mathieson, 2004; Morgan et al, 2011; Mulcahy, et al, 2016; Sulik & Keys, 2014).

CONTEXT

- Students with one or more marginalized identity may be unsure of what to expect --whether their access needs (i.e. what students need in order to participate in the class) will be met, if they will be misgendered, or if racist microaggressions will be challenged.
- Beginning prior to the first day of class, instructors are poised to signal what to expect in their classroom environment. The initial tone that's set shapes student experiences and engagement with course content. Providing clear expectations and modeling appropriate behavior as an instructor is necessary.
- This cannot be achieved through any individual strategy or act.

CONCLUSION

- An affirming environment that meets access needs can enable students to feel comfortable engaging in critical thought, share dissenting opinions, challenge themselves, grow connections to others and, ultimately, be able to focus more on the content of the course.



Addressing each other

Addressing students correctly (and sharing how they can address us) is one of the first things we can do to set the tone the first day of class.

This includes using the correct name and pronoun (whether or not that's their legal name).

Some may prefer to be addressed using an honorific or by their last name.

While more instructors are asking students to share pronouns, oftentimes we are not correcting ourselves or our students when someone is misgendered.

Accountability

- Accountability can take many forms. It centers acknowledging the consequences of our words/actions and our responsibility to correct any resulting harm.
- Addressing problematic comments in class can be set as a norm from the first day.
- Gently correcting language used can be effective while also not resulting in making students feel shamed.
- Engaging with students around the impact of their words & actions can enhance their critical thinking, as well as signal to all students in the class that microaggressions will not be ignored.
- Addressing problematic moments—whether small or large—let's students know you are committed to equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Access needs

Access needs are what we need in order to fully participate—and we all have them! When our access needs are met, we can focus on the actual content in class.

Physical

- Students with low/no vision or hearing may need to sit at the front of the room, have materials made accessible, or use mobility aids.
- Some students may only be able to stand for limited amounts of time, or it may not be comfortable/safe for them to perform class activities that require certain movements.
- Airborne allergies may require that nobody bring a certain food or wear fragrances in the classroom. Doing so can have serious health consequences for the individual!

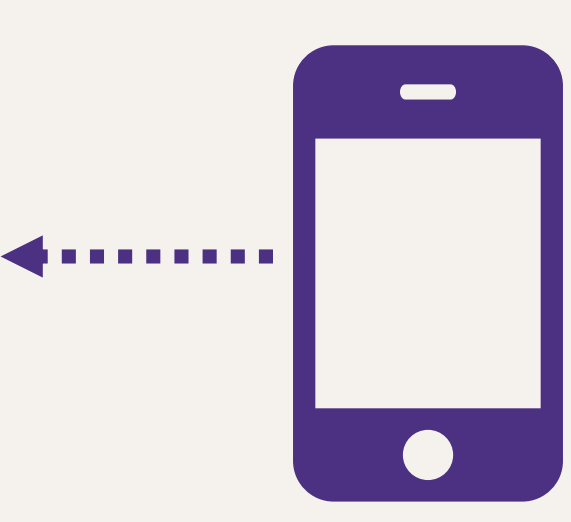
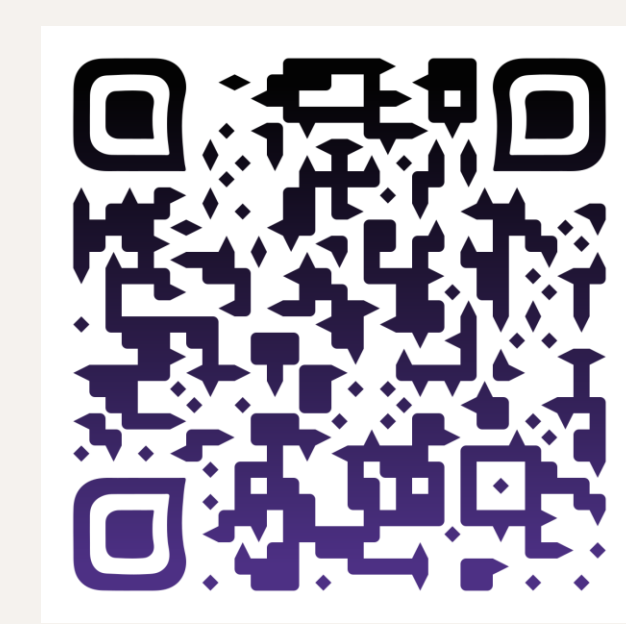
Mental

- Students take different amounts of time to process written information—keep this in mind when designing class activities and slides.
- Outlining the agenda at the beginning of each class can help students know what to expect & when breaks will be.
- Normalizing checking in about mental health and needs makes it easier for students to reach out for help when they need it.

Meeting students' needs ensures they are poised to succeed.

Try These Out

- "Is that phrase you used also sometimes used as coded language to mean something else?"
- "Oof! Something you just said feels sticky to me... let's unpack it."
- "Are there communities or individuals who might have a different perspective than what you just offered?"



Take a picture to download the poster & resources

TANGIBLE STEPS

Consider adopting some of these strategies...

- Send all students an email 1 week prior to the first day, asking them to share access needs and how to address them
- Model accountability around microaggressions
- Conduct confidential mid-quarter course evaluations
- Add your pronouns to your email signature and syllabus to normalize it
- Share your access needs with students (or sharing that your access needs are being met) on the first day of class
- Check in about access needs and how students would like to be addressed 1-2 times per quarter
- Ensure all materials are accessible—that videos are closed-captioned (DRS can assist!) and PDFs are "text-searchable"