Understanding Trans and Gender-Diverse Student Experiences of Online Learning

McMaster University

President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community PACBIC

Prepared by the

Gender and Sexuality working group of the President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC), McMaster University

2020-21 Co-Convenors

Maddie Brockbank, PhD student

Christian Barborini, Pride Community Centre Coordinator

Yimeng Wang, Women and Gender Equity Network Coordinator

2020-21 Resource Person

Wil Prakash Fujarczuk, Sexual Violence Prevention Education Coordinator

Context

This project emerged in response to co-investigators' anecdotal observations of and discussions about trans[1] students' unique experiences of navigating online learning. Namely, many students have shared with the Pride Community Centre (PCC) and Women and Gender Equity Network (WGEN) Coordinators in peer support contexts that they have faced specific positive and negative factors shaping their engagement in online learning spaces. As online and hybrid learning continue to play a role of greater significance at McMaster and in higher education more broadly, this area of research is a timely response to an emerging concern. It also maintains transferable links to and implications for in-person learning.

The report serves as a tangible—albeit introductory—resource for cisgender instructors[2] to create more inclusive spaces for trans students in online, hybrid, and in-person learning. This resource is informed by students' experiences, narratives, and responses, thus ensuring that it reflects and attends to concerns identified by trans students at McMaster University. Specifically, 22 students completed an online survey and 7 students participated in a follow-up interview, both of which focused on students' experiences of online learning.

This is a summary document highlighting key takeaways from the study. It is divided into four sections, each with a list of what participants expressed during the survey and interviews, and a list of recommendations to serve as guidance for instructors. The full report is available on the PACBIC website at pacbic.mcmaster.ca.

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1 By saying "trans", we recognize all transgender, non-binary, gender diverse, Two-Spirit, and questioning folks. We also recognize that some who identify with labels mentioned above may not personally identify as trans and encourage readers to consult with individuals one-on-one to determine what labels best meet their needs.

2 "Instructors" refers to professors, teaching assistants (TAs), and other student-facing staff

Educational experiences, barriers, and recommendations

"People really push the whole 'pronouns in their name,' they really push that on Zoom or they really push it in, like, when you introduce yourself, or whatever. And I really value that, and I think that it creates a really important space of a safer, braver kind of space for people. But as someone who would rather just not address that and as someone who would rather not talk about pronouns because I don't know what the answer is and I'm okay with not having a concrete answer, and that doesn't jive with mainstream culture right now with pronouns and stuff, especially in spaces that are run by cis people, which I think is the majority of my profs, if not all of them."

"It's about highlighting trans academics in your fields, and if you don't think they exist I can guarantee to you they probably do […] I think it goes beyond the performativity sometimes, like encouraging pronouns and things like that. I think it's actually about building it into your curriculum."

Participants expressed:

- Greater need for knowledge and education from instructors on trans identities, pronouns, gender-neutral language given the key role they have in creating a positive classroom experience
  - This includes attending workshops and trainings, as well as self-education
- The need for a balanced approach to pronouns
  - Using pronouns in introductions, screen names, and email signatures can be a powerful way for instructors to normalize pronouns
  - At the same time, mandating pronouns for student introductions or in screen names is potentially harmful as this could out[3] students
  - Instructors must also recognize that pronouns are not static; rather, they can change or be utilized differently by trans students in different contexts
- A difference in the safety and comfortability felt between departments/faculties
  - For example, programs like social work or cultural studies can be more inclusive due to the nature of the topic matter being studied by students, and instructors often have a heightened awareness of issues faced by trans students

Recommendations:

- Become familiar with trans resources on campus, in the community, and online (see final page)
- Seek out workshops run by trans people who discuss the nuances of trans identity, pronouns, and trans-specific issues
  - Ensure those running the workshop are fully compensated for their labour
- Commit to learning and research to ensure your learning spaces are inclusive for trans students
- Listen to how trans students ask to be supported
  - Don't dismiss or minimize concerns when they are brought up
  - Let students know that you are open to and encourage feedback to create a more inclusive learning environment
- Create space to introduce pronouns without making it mandatory
  - This includes introductions, screen names, and email signatures
  - Encourage students to use gender-neutral pronouns ("they/them") or a student's name when referring to classmates unless their pronouns were otherwise specified
- For smaller classes where you speak to students by name, create space for students to share their preferred name if different from the name registered with the university
  - This could be done through a "Get to know you" form online
  - Make sure you use the correct name, even if the online platform does not allow changes to be made
- Use gender-neutral language when referring to the class and normalize this language when talking about issues, populations, and topics
  - For example, "students" or "folks" instead of "ladies and gentlemen"
- Integrate equity into curriculum by discussing contributions made by trans and other marginalized people in the field, and the ways in which the discipline has been implicated in past and contemporary harms to these communities

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3 To "out" someone means to reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation against their will.

Physical experiences, barriers, and recommendations

Participants expressed:

- Feelings of gender dysphoria for some trans students with the use of video and audio technologies in ways that weren't present in the physical classroom setting
  - Some students experienced body dysphoria from self-view when having cameras on was mandatory; turning off self-view isn't possible on all platforms, and for those that it is possible, turning self-view off wasn't necessarily helpful, as students were concerned about how others were seeing them
  - Some students experienced discomfort with hearing their voices in audio recordings if their voice sounds different than how they perceive themselves
- Freedom to tune out or exit video calls if feeling unsafe (for example if they've been misgendered), which isn't possible in-person
- Greater sense of control over on-screen appearance compared to in-person
  - For example, controlling camera angle and appearance

Recommendations:

- Avoid mandating that students keep their cameras on
  - This also accommodates students with weak internet connections or slow computers
- Provide alternative options for students to engage without their camera or microphone (for example chat function, Zoom polls)
- Provide closed-captioning
- Consider the physical barriers that students may be experiencing, including where they are while attending virtual classes
  - For example, they might be in a home environment where they are not out, they may not have sufficient internet connection or access, or they may be in a loud public area

" Some of my classes/professors/TAs did not require students to have their cameras on during lectures/tutorials. However, some of them did have this requirement (which was tied to a portion of one's grade in the course) and as a non-binary student with very strong experiences of dysphoria, it made me feel really awful and prevented me from fully participating in a course's lectures when I was forced to have my camera on. Seeing myself on a screen in a way over which I have little to no control was very triggering to my dysphoria and, as a result, my mental health. Some professors didn't seem to understand that seeing yourself on a Zoom call is different than seeing yourself in a selfie you post online – in the latter, I am in control of how I look and who sees me. In the former, that control is taken away from me and I am forced to comply for the sake of a grade, at the cost of my wellbeing."

" We weren't allowed to have our cameras off, which was very difficult for me. I spent the class obsessing over my appearance and experiencing gender dysphoria. I tried to turn off self-view but I got too focused on what my face looks like."

" There's not necessarily anything that could mimic this with in-person classes, but I really enjoy being able to participate in online classes without worrying about how I present. As someone who is AFAB[4] and genderqueer, I am relatively insecure about the way I present- both dressing in a feminine way when it makes me dysphoric, and dressing in a masculine way in front of other people. Behind a screen, I have less worry about how I present myself on camera- and having the option to keep my camera off entirely is a benefit as well."

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4 Acronym standing for "Assigned Female At Birth."

Administrative experiences, barriers, and recommendations

> " But I know that you can't sacrifice people's needs just because people's needs are overwhelming to navigate."

> " You know how in the course outline often you see a plagiarism section? Why not have a blurb about things like gender pronouns in there as well? […] A course outline, it's a contract. But you should also add to that contract that you are not gonna be discriminatory or violent towards someone because of their gender, religion, [if] they're non-binary or transgender, their sexual orientation, everything. It should be included as well."

Participants expressed:

- Discomfort with online learning platforms that don't allow name changes (like Microsoft Teams)
    - If a trans student uses a name different than their given name and hasn't changed it through Student Services, their deadname[5] will be what appears on-screen
    - This also doesn't allow for people to include their pronouns, which can lead to unintentional misgendering[6]
    - Students often had to take on the burden of correcting peers and instructors who deadname or misgender them
- Frustration with forms that aren't gender-inclusive
    - These forms may rely on binary sex or gender options for collecting demographic information, often use terms for sex and gender interchangeably, and do not include space to disclose pronouns
- A desire to have syllabi include information about creating an inclusive learning environment
    - This would signal to trans students that the instructor is a safe person to talk to in case any concerns arise

Recommendations:

- Include a section about equity and inclusion (including information about gender and pronouns) in course syllabi
- Provide information and resources to students and instructors to further educate themselves
    - For example, making a post on Avenue to Learn with links to resources
- Review course, department, faculty, and university-wide administrative documents to ensure trans-inclusive language is utilized, gender diversity is recognized, and students are given options to disclose
- When possible, use platforms that give students the agency to change their screen name (like Zoom)
    - If not possible, make space for students to share their preferred names and the pronouns they use (if they are comfortable) and use those names and pronouns despite what is displayed on their screen name
- Advocate to your department, faculty, and the university to ensure administrative tools and documents are inclusive and respectful of trans students

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5 Deadnaming is the act of calling a trans person by their birth name or other former name, either intentionally or unintentionally. Deadnaming is harmful, as it invalidates a person's identity.

6 Misgendering is when someone refers to another person in a way that doesn't align with their gender identity (for example, if somebody uses "he/him" pronouns and gets referred to with "she/her" pronouns, this is a case of misgendering). Misgendering can occur intentionally or unintentionally and is often due to preconceived ideas of how a person of a certain gender "should" look, such as the presence of facial hair or having a certain vocal register.

Institutional **experiences,** barriers, and recommendations

> " So many decisions that were being made this year about what the virtual format would look like this year excluded students and people who will actually be receiving the final results of those decisions […] Those people weren't in the room. They weren't in the decision-making spaces, they didn't necessarily have a voice. And if they did, it wasn't a direct voice."

Participants expressed:

- Feeling that individual experiences with instructors were tied to institutional policies and embedded social norms
- Many, if not most, instructors do not have education on creating trans-inclusive spaces
- Lack of trans representation in the classroom, including trans instructors and course curriculum
  - Discomfort approaching instructors about this due to power dynamics and uncertainty of how such feedback would be received
- Instructors with less institutional power (newer, non-tenured) tended to be more accommodating or willing to change behaviour and language to be more trans-inclusive
- Sense of disconnection between positive work being done to promote trans-inclusion across the institution, and desire for this work to be shared and implemented across the institution

Recommendations:

- Offer trans students opportunities to shape ways they can engage in the classroom
- Hire more trans instructors
- Implement training for instructors on how to build more trans-inclusive spaces and create opportunities to practice implementing them
- Hold the institution accountable for the safety of trans students by making accountability measures for all instructors clearer
- Recognize that creating trans-inclusive spaces extends beyond the classroom
  - It includes the task of accessibility and inclusion for other identities
  - It also includes showing up for trans students outside of the classroom, recognizing that student experiences are embedded in broader communities and social interactions

McMaster Student Union Peer Support Services

Pride Community Centre (PCC): https://msumcmaster.ca/service/pcc/

Women and Gender Equity Network (WGEN): https://msumcmaster.ca/service/wgen/

McMaster University Resources

Equity and Inclusion Office (EIO): https://equity.mcmaster.ca

Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office (SVPRO): https://svpro.mcmaster.ca

Student Wellness Centre (SWC), gender-affirming healthcare with Dr. Mary Fletcher:
https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/services/medical-care/medical-services/

Blue Folder (McMaster's Discrimination and Harassment Policy overview):
https://equity.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2021/03/Blue-Folder-McMasters-Discrimination-Harassment-Policy.pdf

Gold Folder (McMaster's Sexual Violence Policy overview):
https://svpro.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2020/11/Gold-Folder.pdf

Office of the Registrar, name change process: https://registrar.mcmaster.ca/services/name-change/

Community Resources

Speqtrum: https://www.speqtrum.ca

Hamilton Trans Health Coalition: https://hamiltontranshealth.ca/

Trans Lifeline: https://translifeline.org/

LGBT Youthline: https://www.youthline.ca/

Online Guides

Pride Community Centre 2STLGBQIA+ Handbook:
https://msumcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2021/03/MSU-PCC-Handbook_2021.pdf

McMaster Trans Inclusion Online Resource:
https://equity.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2020/04/trans-inclusion-online-resource-june-2018-1.docx

Rainbow Health Ontario Glossary: https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/news-publications/glossary/

Developing LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom Resources:
https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/GLSEN_LGBTQ_Inclusive_Curriculum_Resource_2019_0.pdf

Creating Authentic Spaces: A Gender Identity and Gender Expression Toolkit:
https://www.the519.org/education-training/training-resources/our-resources/creating-authentic-spaces

Trans-Inclusive Practices in the Classroom: https://www.nyu.edu/life/global-inclusion-and-diversity/learning-and-development/toolkits/trans-inclusive-classrooms.html

Towards More Trans-Inclusive Classroom Spaces:
https://ctlt-inclusiveteaching.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/01/trans-inclusive-classrooms_v2.pdf

Inclusive Syllabus: https://ctlt-inclusiveteaching.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2019/08/inclusive-syllabus-digital.pdf

My Pronouns: https://www.mypronouns.org

Asking For and Using Pronouns:
https://www.brynmawr.edu/sites/default/files/asking-for-name-and-pronouns.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0fCLc_I1Qm-k6eHVpXqhYSPxwQUSHe5i5QVV4cCa-34ovtOHEzs4jMGXM

Good Practices: Names and Pronouns: https://lgbt.umd.edu/good-practices-names-and-pronouns

Teaching Beyond the Gender Binary in University Classes:
https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-beyond-the-gender-binary-in-the-university-classroom/