



# (Trans)Gendering the Classroom

*Rob S. Pusch*

I've spent a large part of my life studying gender. I don't mean only academic study, although I have done that, but I've analyzed it as part of my every day life. As a person who identifies as transgender, I am in a position to think about gender differently than those who never question their gender or only consider it unconsciously. In this essay I first look at what it means to be gendered, then I explore the meaning of *transgender* and talk about the experiences of being transgender in the classroom.

## **Being Gendered**

Gender is a means of organizing social experiences, of understanding how individuals are expected to interact within society and to construct their lives. Gender is one of the first determinations we make about a person: "Is it a boy or a girl?" is almost always the first question asked when a child is born. Within American culture, people assume there are only two gender categories, man/boy and woman/girl. It is assumed that gender is synonymous with one's assigned birth sex:

those considered male are boys who will grow into men, and those considered female are girls who will grow into women. Sex and gender assignment is initially based on the appearance of genitalia.<sup>1</sup> From the moment infants are sexed, and gendered, they begin to be socialized in particular ways that encourage them to publicly present themselves as the gender that coincides with their identified birth sex. In the United States this begins in simple ways, such as “pink is for girls” and “blue is for boys.” The development of gender is accompanied by assumptions about how a person interacts with others, how one behaves, and the roles one will take on, such as parenting and occupational roles. Gender is also demonstrated through the use of clothing, hair, mannerisms, voice, and other gendered actions. These are the foundations for learning how to create ourselves as appropriately gendered persons so others can perceive us as fitting into the correct gender category.

Social conventions for gendered roles and presentation are reinforced within

everyday life through social institutions such as families, schools, the classroom, and the mass media. It is through these institutions that gender is reproduced and can be seen as socially constructed. This then feeds into how we, as agents within our culture, construct our seemingly personal identities as men or women.

Despite this understanding of the socially constructed nature of gender, there is still the fundamental assumption that gender is only performed upon appropriately sexed bodies. What happens, then, when someone breaks this rule?

### **Breaking Gender Rules**

Growing up as a masculine female, I was often confronted in women’s restrooms by comments such as “you’re in the wrong restroom; this is the women’s room!” I would exclaim that I was in the right place, but was left feeling I had done something wrong. From a young age I was breaking the rules of gender because I was a girl with short hair who wore masculine clothing. For gender outlaws, these transgressions are often met with confusion, anxiety, or hostility from the people around us. Even though our



genitals and other secondary sex characteristics may not be visible for public viewing, it is assumed that our gender presentation signifies the presence of particularly sexed bodies. Those who cannot be easily identified as a male or a female are typically blamed for causing others to be confused. These assumptions serve to maintain the rigid structure of the binary gender system by erasing the identities of those whose bodies and gender identities do not fit within the binary gender/sex construct. Those of us who identify as transgender disrupt these assumptions.

### **What is Transgender?**

Public use of the term transgender has increased over the past five years. It is a broad term whose definition is still changing and does not define a single identity or behavior, but is generally defined as “someone who transcends the conventional definitions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’”. Butch lesbians, transsexuals, radical faeries, boss girls, crossdressers, drag queens, sissies, tomboys, and many other kinds of people vary from the conventional expectations of their birth gender” (American Boyz, 2001). The breadth of this definition encompasses a wide range of transgender people. This suggests that assumptions cannot be made about anyone who identifies as

transgender. The stereotypical portrayal of a transgender person as “a man trapped in a woman’s body,” or vice versa, inaccurately describes the experience of many transgender people.

There are a variety of ways to conceptualize categories of gender. Many transgender persons do not feel comfortable in the gender assigned to them at birth but have varying degrees of identification with another gender category. Some transgender persons describe themselves as being third gendered. Some feel that there is a gender continuum. These other genders, populated by transgender persons, are not definable within the hegemonic binary gender system. They remind us that binary gender system is socially constructed and that the privileges accorded people based on gender are not natural and can be disrupted.

It is often difficult to explain this to those who have never questioned their own gender identity or cannot imagine anything beyond the binary gender system. For me, it’s not that I feel like a particular gender, but rather I don’t feel like the gender I was assigned at birth. I am not sure what it means to feel like a man, but I know I do not feel like woman. However, since others can only see two possible genders, my presentation as masculine marks me as a white middle class man, and often I am taken to be a gay man. Along with this

comes a whole host of assumptions about who I am, how I should act in particular situations, and what my personal history and experiences have been. It also influences how others react and interact with me.

In the 10+ years since I first came out as transgender, I have seen a change in the visibility and representation of transgender persons. Ten years ago the term was rarely heard. The terms generally used were *transsexual* and *transvestite*, both of which came out of medical literature. Transsexual typically referred to people who felt they were born into the wrong body and desired to have their bodies changed through surgery to match their gender identities. Transvestite referred to those who dressed in the clothing of the opposite sex, or what is now commonly called crossdressing.

Over the past decade there have been an increasing number of mainstream articles on transgender persons. These include articles both about, and by, transgender persons, as well as the

representation of transgender and transsexual persons in television and film. The representations of transgender persons have been mixed; some present transgender persons as transsexuals, individuals who feel they were born into the wrong body, or as persons who are merely misunderstood. Others portray transgender persons as the subjects of violence, including news media stories on transgender prostitutes who are murdered, and movies such as *Boys Don't Cry* (a movie about Brandon Teena), and *The Badge* (a movie about the murder of a transsexual sex worker). The common theme here is that the transgender people are murdered when their "deception" is discovered. The viewer is led to believe that the transgender individuals are responsible for their own murders because of the way they chose to live. Films like these help to construct shared understandings of what it means to be transgender in today's society and deeply influence adolescents who identify with, and relate to, these murder victims.



**National Transgender Advocacy Coalition >> [www.ntac.org](http://www.ntac.org)**

NTAC works for the advancement of understanding and the attainment of civil rights for all transgendered, intersexed, and gender variant people in every aspect of society, and actively opposes discriminatory acts by all means legally available.

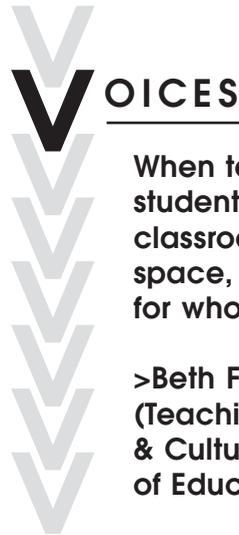
## **(Trans)Gender in the Classroom**

How does being transgender impact campus, and more specifically, classroom experiences? For those who identify as transgender, a number of issues surface. Gender is a public display that is viewed by the people around us, thus the process of transition that many transgender people experience can be quite visible.<sup>2</sup> Those who successfully pass as a particular gender become invisible to those around them as transgender persons, but not all transitions go unnoticed. Being visible and invisible as transgender raises different issues on campus and in the classroom.

### **Transitioning on Campus**

As mentioned previously, transition is a very public process, one that can be obvious to others. People who identify as transgender do not transition at the same rate, or in the same manner. Regardless, those who go through a time of being marked as breaking the unwritten rules of gender often cause anxiety and confusion among acquaintances and colleagues. This can result in many responses on campus and in the classroom.

For my dissertation (Pusch, 2003), I spoke with a number of transgender college students about their experiences of transition and the issues they faced. For example, one participant, Kristen,<sup>3</sup> spoke about her experience as an undergraduate



## **VOICES**

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**When teachers and students talk about the classroom as a safe space, I wonder-safe for whom?**

**>Beth Ferri  
(Teaching & Leadership  
& Cultural Foundations  
of Education)**

student at a large private university. While she presented as a woman and had begun taking hormones, she had not yet legally changed her name. This meant that her school records were still in her “boy name.” It is not uncommon for transgender students to be in this situation because going through the legal name change process can be costly and takes time. However, this meant that on campus she was typically called by Justin, not Kristen. One professor commented that he recognized her as a Smith, but that the name on his class list was Justin Smith and that couldn’t be her. When she replied that it was, his response was “weird...” The professor was clearly confused by someone visually presenting as a woman, yet having

a masculine name. While his feelings about the disjuncture between Kristen's presentation and her name on the class list are not uncommon, it succeeded in making Kristen feel uncomfortable identifying as transgender. The professor's reaction also shut down any potential discussion with Kristen about being transgender and how she preferred to be addressed in class.

Along with this discomfort of how to come out to faculty and explain to them how we wish to be addressed, transgender students often feel they end up having to educate others on what it means to be transgender. Often the burden is placed on us to become educators, or we are made to feel as if it is our responsibility to make others feel more comfortable around us. While some transgender people may not mind being put in the position of explaining what it means to be transgender, others see this as a burden. As one friend of mine commented, when he comes out to others, he ends up feeling like an object of curiosity—like a carnival exhibit, or a freak.

### **Becoming Invisible**

I've been on hormones for over five years and have, for the most part, become invisible as transgender. Since testosterone has successfully masculinized my appearance, people who do not know me, or who are meeting me for the first time, assume I am biologically male. Given the anxiety of the years when I was more obviously breaking the unwritten gender rules, you might imagine this is preferable. However, being invisible brings its own

set of anxieties. Passing as male means that those who do not know I am transgender do not fully know me. While I may look male and appear to be a man, who I am is far more complex; who I am is also impacted by my personal history of being female and growing up as a girl.

Since transgender persons are at a greater risk of violence,<sup>4</sup> invisibility brings a measure of safety. This often leads transgender people to maintain their silence. As someone who is often invisible,



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I am able to witness how oblivious others are to the presence of transgender persons and about how gender works in general. For example, last year I was observing a class in which students were responding to a talk on LGBT issues. One young woman summarized the talk saying “it was about lesbians, gays, bisexuals and ... what was that other thing?” Someone else had to say “transgender.” While within the LGBT community many have at least heard about transgender persons, this young woman’s comment was a reminder that not only do many people not understand transgender issues, they don’t even know the word. This level of ignorance makes coming out in classrooms even more daunting.

While some of us are out about being transgender and try to educate others on transgender issues, many prefer the

anonymity of passing. Within the classroom, faculty can, and should, work to create an environment that allows transgender students to feel safe no matter how they choose to present themselves. As more and more students begin to transition while in college, faculty will need to be aware of the steps they can take to help create an accepting environment. Faculty should be respectful of student requests such as using a name other than the one that appears on the class list, and using students’ desired pronouns. Also, do not assume the student is openly transgender. While some students might come out to a faculty member, they may not be out to other students. Many students are concerned about the reactions of those around them as they go through the process of transitioning from one gender to another.<sup>5</sup>

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## >>REFERENCES

- American Boyz. (2001, March 3). Transgendered? The American Boyz. Retrieved January 15, 2004, from <http://www.amboyz.org/articles/transgendered.html>
- Pusch, R. S. (2003). The bathroom and beyond: Transgendered college students’ perspectives of transition (Doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University, 2003). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 64, 456.

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## >>ENDNOTES

- 1 > While there are individuals born intersexed, these genitals are assumed to be “abnormal” and are often surgically “corrected” as soon after birth as possible. For more information on intersexed persons see the website for the Intersexed Society of North America, <http://www.isna.org>
- 2 > *Transition* is a term used by transgender people to refer to the process of coming out and beginning to live as one’s self-identified gender. This may or may not include medical intervention. Transition may also include changing one’s name, pronoun use, and changing gender presentation. Medical interventions may include hormone therapy, some form of chest surgery, and/or genital alteration.
- 3 > Kristen is the pseudonym used for one of the participants in my dissertation research.
- 4 > Human Rights Campaign, in their Transgender Basics states “Transgender people are often targeted for hate violence based on their non-conformity with gender norms and/or their perceived sexual orientation. Hate crimes against transgender people tend to be particularly violent.” For more information see <http://www.hrc.org>
- 5 > November 5<sup>th</sup> has been marked as the Day of Remembrance. For more information, as well as a list of names of transgendered persons who have been murdered see <http://www.gender.org/remember/day/index.html>