



## Redefining Gender in the Classroom

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*Innovative Approach:* In recent times, paradigm shifts have propelled cultural change, and our society is continually attempting to integrate these shifts into a new consensus. These changes have not only influenced what is considered allowable in conversation but also in many other forms of behavior. One current shift relates to gender identity and expression: what is gender? How is gender defined? How is gender communicated? Many individuals no longer identify with binary definitions such as “he” or “she,” or “male” or “female”. Exclusively male and female public restrooms no longer accommodate these new definitions, and when describing individuals outside of these traditional dichotomies, using “other” or “fill in the blank” does not fully capture the complexity of the concept of gender, particularly within the workplace.

The New York City Commission on Human Rights has identified 31 separate categories of Gender Identity<sup>1</sup>. Obviously, most of these transcend the traditional categories of male and female. NYC businesses that do not accommodate individuals identifying with any of these gender identities can face a fine of up to \$250,000<sup>2</sup> in an anti-discrimination law suit on the basis of gender identity and gender expression.

When gender was a simple binary distinction, one method used to signify gender was dress and appearance cues (Barnes & Eicher, 1997). How are current gender distinctions communicated to others? How are current gender distinctions communicated to others? What dress and appearance cues, if any, can be used to confirm that others are respectfully addressed “by their preferred pronoun?” *The purpose of this proposed teaching exercise is twofold.* First, to teach students how individuals representing a range of gender identities express their gender and the extent to which dress and appearance cues plays a role in such expression. Second, to *assess student awareness* and appreciation for diverse genders.

*(1) To what extent are students aware of current gender identities? (2) To what extent is instruction about gender identities effective in impacting student attitude and anticipation of how dress is used to convey gender identity? (3) To what extent are dress cues accurate in conveying gender identity? (4) To what extent is dress important to the communication of gender identities?*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cchr/downloads/pdf/publications/GenderID\\_Card2015.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cchr/downloads/pdf/publications/GenderID_Card2015.pdf) retrieved 2018-11-26

<sup>2</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/law/legal-guidances-gender-identity-expression.page>, section IV, retrieved 2018-11-26

*Implementation of Strategy:* The implementation strategy included two parts. The first part of the strategy was to prompt students to reflect on how dress has been used in the past. Students were asked to detail how gender was expressed through dress. They were required to explore how gender was expressed at different periods, namely Ancient Greek/Romans, 1920s, 1950s, Late 1960s/Early 1970s, 1980s, and 2019/2020 predictions for the future. For example, student could discuss dress-like garments worn by Ancient Greeks or the suits worn by men by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They then discussed their overall findings with questions: 1) Overall what style features represent male? 2) Which style features represent female? 3) What have been changes in features and meaning of gender overtime? Explain. 4) What are some pre-conceived notions of male and female dress in the workplace? 5. Were you aware that there 31 different gender identities have been identified? \_\_\_\_\_

A quasi-experiment was proposed for part 2 of the teaching strategy that both enabled additional reflection on gender and assessment of Part 1. Quasi-experimental research involves the manipulation of an independent variable but lacks either a control group or random assignment of participants as conditions of the research design. This research used two intact but matched groups. Students were recruited from two courses (one at a Northeastern University and one at a Midwestern university). Students in both groups were given a pre-test to assess their characteristics to ensure both student groups were matched on demographics and other relevant traits, and to assess their extant knowledge of the concept of gender identity. Then students were given the treatment (information obtained from part 1 of the research). After the treatment, both groups received the post-test (i.e., a parallel form of the pretest). The students were enrolled in different courses within fashion programs, an introduction to the fashion industry and an internship course. The entire process was approved by the University's IRB board (#134739-1).

*Description of Effectiveness and Learning Outcomes:* Fifty-six college students attending two universities participated in the activity. The students attending the Midwestern university (n=35) completed the exercise as part of an introduction to the fashion industry course and another 21 students attending a Northeastern university participated as part of a fashion internship course. There were 46 females, 8 males and one student answered "female, but kinda non-binary sometimes," and another identify as non-binary. Researchers asked, "Were you aware that 31 different genders have been identified?" in the pre-test 40 said "No," while 21 said "Yes." There were freshmen (n= 17), Sophomores (n = 10), Juniors (n= 6) to seniors (n= 27). Their majors included fashion marketing, graphic design, apparel design, public relations, biology, theatre creation, and finance just to name a few. Students indicated they were somewhat liberal (n = 21), neutral (n=17), and 14 answered somewhat liberal (n = 14) Only two were very liberal. After qualitative analysis of the themes within the responses to the survey before and after the activity students demonstrated an increased ability in the following: 1) Recognized multiple ways that the impact of dress and body images affect human behavior. Students made many associations between dress and behavior. For example, they were aware of pink for girls and blue for boys

however, students indicated this rule is change. 2) Related concepts and theories of human behavior to marketplace interactions between fashion products and everyday life. For example, students in the post-test discussed “*dress*” using terms of “*body modifications*” 3) Developed empowerment and a sense of social commitment that results in effective advocacy and influence positive change. The post-test responses indicated support for gender variety as explained by a student: “*people ... should be more open-minded to people wearing whatever they want to wear.*” 4) Developed critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving processes to issues and concerns in psychology of appearance and dress.

*Conclusions and Follow Up:* Gender structures should be challenged in traditional classrooms on which gender studies, past histories, or future gender relations will be shaped by the heterogeneous norms of society. Providing undergraduate students with opportunities to discuss gender issues, sexual orientation, and diversity is vital as it reflects the contemporary political landscape in which students need a voice and no longer should be marginalized. This exercise will be conducted again, with a larger student body in Gender, Dress, & Society courses where the depth of the 31 different genders can further be discussed along with the differences in gender, dress, and gender history.

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