VU PRIDE'S TIPS & TRICKS FOR AN INCLUSIVE TEACHING ENVIRONMENT (SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY)

VU Pride's tips & tricks for an inclusive teaching environment (sexual and gender diversity)

Dear teacher (to be),

Thank you for taking the time to read our tips & tricks for an inclusive teaching environment! We appreciate this, because there may be many students in your classroom that need your support in making the (online) classroom a safer place: approximately 5 to 7 percent[1] of your students is likely to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and/or anything else that is not heterosexual and/or cisgender[2] (LGBTQIA+).

Perhaps you think that sexual and gender identity is not important in the classroom as this is purely a private matter, but actually, an inclusive learning climate is one of the keys to academic excellence[3]. In the UK for example, 19% percent of LGBTQIA+ students did not finish their study, compared with 11% of non-LGBTQIA+ students[4]. Also, VU Amsterdam specifically strives for 'inclusive excellence' by including diversity in education[5].

We understand you might be terribly busy and do not have the time to submerge yourself into hundreds of pages of information on sexual & gender diversity. This is why we have summed up some key tips & tricks in this document. Would you like to know more? We would be very happy to hear from you! Just pop us an email at pride@vu.nl.

With love,

The authors
On behalf of VU Pride – the network for LGBTQIA+ students & employees of VU Amsterdam

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[1] Movisie. Handreiking LHBTQI Feiten en Cijfers 2021 (https://www.movisie.nl/sites/movisie.nl/files/2021-03/Handreiking-LHBTI-Feiten-Cijfers-2021.pdf, accessed 9 September 2021)

[2] Cisgender refers to a person whose gender identity reflects the characteristics of the gender binary. For further information, see Appendix I.

[3] Roorda, Debora, Suzanne Jak, Frans Oort & Helma Koomen, "Affective relationships are associated with students' engagement and academic achievement: A Meta-Analytic Update and Test of the Mediating Role of Engagement" *School Psychology Review*. Vol. 46 Issue 3 (2017): 239-261.

[4] LGBTQI-Inclusivity in the Higher Education Curriculum. University of Birmingham. (https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/teaching-academy/documents/public/lgbt-best-practice-guide.pdf, accessed 9 September 2021)

[5] VU Website (https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/diversity, accessed 9 September 2021)

VU Pride's tips & tricks for an inclusive teaching environment (sexual and gender diversity)

1. **Share your own pronouns and invite students to share theirs**

A fabulous start to inclusive teaching is sharing your pronouns and inviting students to share theirs. A pronoun is a part of a sentence that is used to refer to a person / people, e.g., 'she', 'they', 'he'.

What you can do:

- When introducing yourself state your name and pronouns ('I am Abdel, I go by he/him pronouns'). We also wholeheartedly recommend this, also if you think everybody understands what your pronouns are (for example: if you are a woman and you are also perceived by society as a woman). This can open the door for students to be open about their gender identity and gives off the broader message that you are sensitive to issues regarding gender and sexual diversity.
- Add your pronouns on Zoom for online classes (log on to Zoom and go to your profile to edit this) and in Canvas.
- When asking students to introduce themselves, invite them to also state their name and pronouns. This can be very important to prevent students from being referred to as a person of the wrong gender ('being misgendered').When in doubt about which given pronouns to use: don't assume but ask ('you stated you use she/her and they/them pronouns, which one would you like me to use?').
- It is important not to pressure anyone to share their pronouns. Some people may still be searching, may not yet be ready to share such personal information about themselves, or may not feel comfortable with any pronouns or reject the notion of a stable gender identity.

2. **Setting an example: including LGBTQIA+ examples and role models**

In every classroom setting, teachers use clarifying examples and cases. Very often these examples feature or are based on white, cisgender, heterosexual people. For LGBTQIA+ students, representation can be an important factor to feel at home in the classroom.

What you can do:

- Include LGBTQIA+ examples and/or issues on sexual or gender identity[6] in your lectures and in your written materials. Please note there are opportunities to do so in almost every academic field. For example:
  - When you are a Methodology teacher and you discuss data collection, you can encourage students to include more categories than 'male' or 'female' when gathering data. Other relevant options include 'intersex', 'non-binary', 'gender fluid' and 'other'. Consider also what best serves your research aims: data about respondents' sex or about their gender identity.
  - When teaching Business and Economics, include an example of a company targeting LGBTQIA+ costumers[7].

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[6] Gender identity is how a person perceives themselves in relation to gender and is, thus, impacted by their society's framework of gender. For further information see Appendix I.

[7] 'Toolbox Inclusief hoger onderwijs met betrekking tot seksuele en genderdiversiteit' Student Pride https://www.scienceguide.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Toolbox-definitief-22-05-2021.pdf, accessed 9 September 2021).

- On the rare occasion that there are no examples with LGBTQIA+ topics you could explain why or ask your students this question. For instance, in History, written sources may be biased towards sources from and about heteronormative people but that does not mean that LGBTQIA+ people did not exist!
- Be especially mindful to also mention LGBTQIA+ topics when teaching about sexuality and relationships.
- Make sure that the LGBTQIA+ people in your examples are not stigmatizing. For example, when you are part of the medical sciences department, please make sure that not every gay person you mention is living with HIV/AIDS. Not everyone who is gay is living with HIV/AIDS and not everyone who is living with HIV/AIDS is gay.

3. Words matter – choose them wisely!

'Dear ladies and gentlemen' or 'can everybody write down his or her name' can seem like perfectly valid forms of communication, but it does not do justice to the group of students that does not identify as male or female (for example, non-binary students do not identify as 'a man' or 'a woman'). Using inclusive wording can make a big difference for many of your students.

What you can do:

- Address people with their function, for example 'dear students' instead of 'dear ladies and gentlemen' or refer to 'parents' instead of 'mother and father'.
- When referring to LGBTQIA+ people please always use 'People-first language'. 'Transgender', 'bisexual' and the other terms are adjectives, not nouns! Please talk about 'a transgender/bisexual/etc. person' and not about 'a transgender' or 'a bisexual'.
- Instead of 'he or she' and 'his or her' please use 'they' or 'their' if gender is irrelevant. It is also good practice (and grammatically correct) to use 'they/them' when referring to a person whose gender you don't know.
- Try not to make assumptions about someone's gender or sexual identity and lifestyle, try to use gender neutral words such as 'partner(s)', instead of assuming that a female student's partner is male and vice versa.

4. Include LGBTQIA+ inclusive literature

Striving for a wide range of diversity in the mandatory literature in your course is a very helpful way of including diversity in a course.

What you can do:

- Include literature from LGBTQIA+ authors. For example, in mathematics, you could include information on the life and work of Alan Turing. When teaching history, you could include a textual source from an LGBTQIA+ person. In economics, you could include work on the socioeconomic position of LGBTQIA+ people, such as the COST project (a research project on this topic in which VU Amsterdam participates)
- Include literature about sexual and gender diversity. This can be very relevant in psychology, sociology, and biology, to name a few areas.

5. How can you be an ally?

Even if you do not identify as LGBTQIA+ yourself, you can still be a great ally who supports LGBTQIA+ people. There are many things you can do to be an ally, below we give a few examples, but there are many more options of course!

What you can do:

- Let your students know they can reach out to you if they are experiencing difficulties, for example by writing a statement for Canvas / the course website (example in Appendix II).
- Inform yourself about where you can refer your students to if they are having difficulties, such as the team 'Social Wellbeing' or VU Pride.
- Many LGBTQIA+ people have personal experiences with stigmatization and discrimination: this can range from 'jokes' being made about (their) sexual or gender identity to outright homo/bi/transphobic remarks. If such remarks or 'jokes' are made in the classroom it can make a big difference if a teacher steps in and addresses the issue. There are many ways in which you can do this, ranging from speaking up about a topic, saying you do not accept these comments in your classroom, to opening a discussion about LGBTQIA+ discrimination. Choose what you feel comfortable with! But please do mark the moment: your silence might otherwise be interpreted as approval.
- Show your support for LGBTQIA+ people by, for example, paying attention to important days for the community (such as Coming Out Day, the 11th of October).

6. Respect your student's privacy

If a student shares information about their gender identity or sexual orientation with you, it is not necessarily something they want (you) to share with all other students.

What you can do:

- Do not share information about your students' sexual orientation or gender identity with anybody else unless they have given you their explicit consent.

7. Inform yourself on LGBTQIA+ topics

Familiarizing yourself with information on sexual and gender diversity can be very helpful. There are many sources available, below are a few:

- LGBTQI-Inclusivity in the Higher Education Curriculum. University of Birmingham. Click here.
- Delivering LGBT-inclusive Higher Education. Stonewall. Click here.
- Regenboogschrijfwijzer. Gemeente Amsterdam. Click here (in Dutch).
- Toolbox Inclusief hoger onderwijs met betrekking tot seksuele en genderdiversiteit. Student Pride. Click here (in Dutch).

Of course, you can always contact VU Pride if you are looking for more information: pride@vu.nl. Also please contact VU Pride's student ambassadors: vuprideambassadors@gmail.com.

VU Pride's student ambassadors:
- Gabriëlla van Bruggen (Faculty of Law (Criminology and law))
- Isabella Farhat (Faculty of Humanities (Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology))
- Elena McDonnell (Faculty of Medicine)
- Melanie Rietveld (Faculty of Science/Humanities (Biomedical science and philosophy))

Many people use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably, even though they mean different things. Specifically, it is a common assumption that sex is binary, and that gender follows naturally from sex. Therefore, one is either considered male and a man, or female and feminine. This is what we call the gender binary. In what follows we explain these terms in some further depth.

Sex:

Sex is commonly understood as a biological category: one's sex is defined by one's external genitalia (such as a penis or vagina), gonads (such as testes and ovaries), chromosomes (such as XY, XX, XXY), hormones (such as testosterone and oestrogen. Most of us have learnt that sex is binary: based on their biological make up, a person is either 'male' or 'female'. However, the real story is not as clear-cut. There is much variation in people's biological constitution which we can see, for instance, in intersex people, who have biological characteristics from more than one sex.

Gender:

Even though many people feel as though their gender flows naturally from their sex, gender is not a biological given but a socio-cultural construct. It refers to masculinity and femininity, and everything in between and beyond. Gender identity is how a person perceives themselves in relation to gender and is thus impacted by their society's framework of gender.

The gender binary:

The gender binary is a western system of classification that views sex, gender, and sexuality as biologically linked and binary: to have male sex characteristics means that one is masculine and desires women, while to have female sex characteristics means that one is feminine and desires men.

It is clear, however, that there is much greater variability in sex, gender, and sexuality than is captured by the gender binary. Indeed, the gender binary is not present in all cultures. The reason, however, that such binary thinking is so pervasive is that many people are taught from the moment they are born to act in certain ways based on their sex characteristics, which makes it feel natural. Some have even argued that sex itself is gendered: without a socio-cultural concept of binary gender, sex would not exist and instead we would simply refer to a range of bodily variations.

Importantly, the gender binary is not a neutral system that simply describes human variation, but one that hierarchically organises people: women are inferior to men, and those who act outside of the expectations of their sex by enacting a different gender or sexuality are viewed as unnatural. It is what underpins much of the discrimination faced by LGBTIQA+ people.

Cisgender:

Cisgender refers to a person whose gender identity aligns (within the gender binary) with the sex they were assigned at birth. It reflects the characteristics of the gender binary, in that a cisgender person's gender identity is what others expect them to identify as. For example, someone who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman. The term cisgender is an adjective, it should not be used as a noun, and is commonly used as an antonym of transgender.

Transgender:

The term transgender, sometimes shortened to trans, refers to a person whose gender identity does not align (within the gender binary) with the sex they were assigned at birth. In other words, it does not align with the ideas of the gender binary about sex and gender. For example, someone who was assigned female at birth and does not identify as a woman. The term transgender is an adjective and should not be used as a noun. Transgender is, furthermore, an umbrella term that also includes (but is not limited to) non-binary, genderfluid, and genderqueer people.

Non-binary:
Non-binary is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely. Non-binary people can feel that their gender identity and gender experience involves being both a man and a woman, or that it is fluid, in between, or completely outside of that binary.
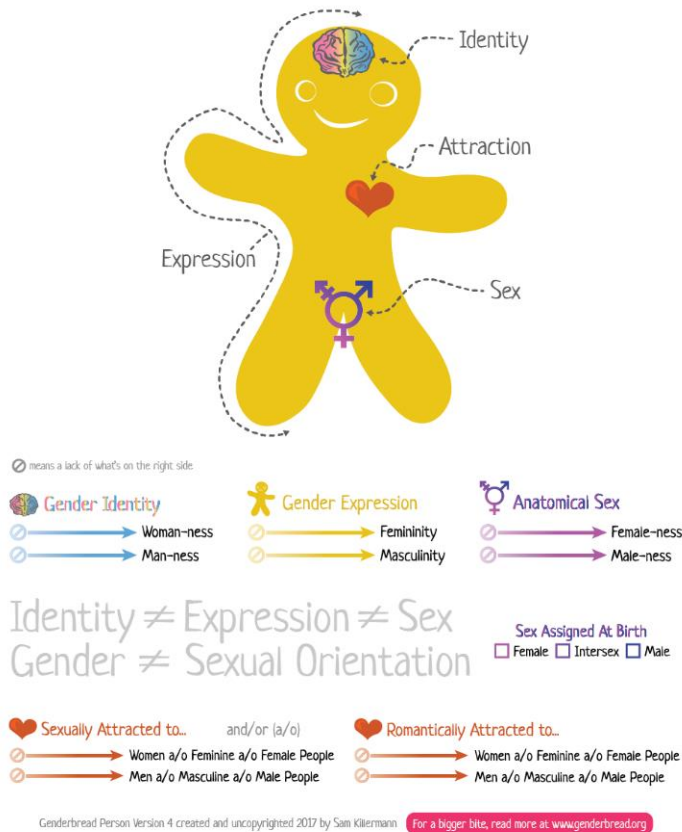
Gender fluid:
A person who is gender fluid is flexible in regard to the gender with which they identify, meaning their gender identity and/or gender expression changes over time.

Gender queer:
Genderqueer can refer to the feeling that one's gender is fluid, or that one's gender exists outside the gender binary. However, genderqueer identity is also open to anyone who "queers" gender. This means anyone who does things that are outside of the norm of their actual or perceived gender identity.

Helpful sketch[8]:

The Genderbread Person v4

Gender Identity — Woman-ness / Man-ness
Gender Expression — Femininity / Masculinity
Anatomical Sex — Female-ness / Male-ness

Identity ≠ Expression ≠ Sex
Gender ≠ Sexual Orientation

Sex Assigned At Birth: ☐ Female ☐ Intersex ☐ Male

Sexually Attracted to… and/or (a/o)
Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

Romantically Attracted to…
Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

Genderbread Person Version 4 created and uncopyrighted 2017 by Sam Killermann   For a bigger bite, read more at www.genderbread.org

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[8] Source: Genderbread website https://www.genderbread.org/ (accessed 28 February 2022)

"We strive to offer students with a safe and inclusive classroom environment. We welcome the perspective of students of all ethnicities, genders, spiritual beliefs, and sexual orientations, among others. If you feel discriminated on the basis of your identity, please report it to the course staff.

If you have a disability and require accommodations, please let us know before the beginning of the course so that we can discuss your accommodations and needs to make the course as accessible to you as possible."[9]

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[9] Example taken from https://socialrobotics.atlassian.net/wiki/spaces/SIR2021/overview#10.-Inclusivity-statement (accessed 28 February 2022)