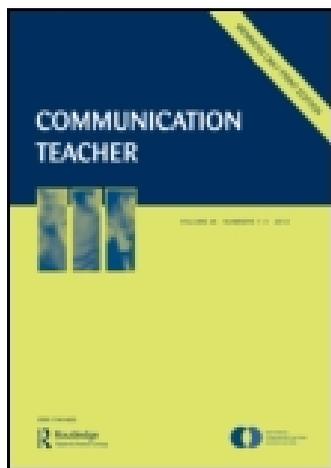


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Teaching Sex, Gender, Transsexual, and Transgender Concepts

Karen McGrath

Courses: Any gender and communication course or courses with a gender unit

Objectives: The objective of this activity is to engage students in mediated gender experiences in order to examine the differences and complexities of gender and its related concepts. Specifically, students will be able to distinguish sex and gender, transgender and transsexual, and sexuality and gender; identify and clarify common misperceptions about various lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (gender or sexual), queer people (LGBTQ); and promote civil discourse.

Introduction and Rationale

As many gender teachers know, distinctions between and among complex terms in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (gender or sexual), queer (LGBTQ) group are often difficult for students to articulate and identify. In fact, terms like “sex” and “gender” are often conflated in public discourse, and terms like “transgender” and “transsexual” are often erroneously used and people misrepresented, and thus difficult for students to distinguish, especially when knowledge is often derived from media discourse. This teaching activity tackles these difficulties by emphasizing the importance of conceptual clarity in discussing gender identity, thereby achieving the aforementioned objectives. The context for this activity is that of “collective identities,” which stresses “the similarities or shared attributes around which group members coalesce,” specifically in the LGBTQ community (Cerulo, 1997, p. 386). While there is a danger in essentializing collective identities and ultimately creating binary oppositions and ignoring the fluidity of identity, this activity’s social constructionist framework avoids this pitfall. Social constructionism challenges assumed binaries and essentialism while assuming gender is “an identity continually renegotiated via linguistic exchange and performance” (Cerulo, 1997, p. 387). In fact, it is this framework’s linguistic focus that guides the differentiation of gender

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concepts. One early constructionist theory, the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis, notes how language influences our perceptions and thus shapes our reality. Assuming this to be true, it also follows that our current known realities can be shaped differently with new language possibilities and thus impact our own gender identity categories, how we perceive others' gender identities, and how we promote civil discourse about varying gender performances.

At the core of this multi-day activity are, first, distinctions made by Wood (2013) and other gender scholars, including Brill and Pepper (2008) and West and Zimmerman (1987), which directly connect to the activity's specific objectives. While instructors need familiarity with these distinctions *prior to* conducting this activity, most current gender textbooks can be used in lieu of those chosen here. Second, and also important to the success of this activity, is the social constructionist conceptualization of gender as something we do, as a performance in everyday life that influences what we do and how we do it, verbally and nonverbally. Therefore, the activity examines real world and media gender representations thereby providing opportunities for civil discourse, thus meeting the last objective.

The Activity

Class discussions encourage students to distinguish varying gender identities and acknowledge difference in civil ways. Ideally, three class periods and/or online sessions are needed for the full activity, but it can be adapted to meet course needs across academic systems such that an instructor can choose part or all of the videos or the DVD as examples and still meet the activity's objectives. However, minimally, instructors must be comfortable with and knowledgeable of the concepts used in the activity. The resources included here (especially *Transgender Basics*, Brill and Pepper, and the Nagoshi and Brzuzy article) provide adequate information for this activity. However, consulting the resources used below, having discussions with local LGBTQ centers, and using LGBTQ resources such as <http://www.glsen.org>, <http://www.glaad.org>, <http://www.pflag.org>, <http://www.hrc.org>, and geneq.berkeley.edu provide additional background and distinctions necessary for this activity. Additionally, attending an ally program (e.g., Safe Zone Training) can provide further clarity for instructors.

Time required: Three, 75-minute class periods

Materials needed: Two handouts (described below), *My Princess Boy* (book), *Ma Vie En Rose* (DVD: 88 minutes), *Transgender Basics* (video: 19 minutes), and "Family embraces 'Princess Boy'" (video: 5 minutes)

Instructor Preparation for Three-day Activity

Prior to the first class meeting, use Wood's (2013) textbook (or another), Brill and Pepper's (2008) *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals* or similar books, The Center's (2007) *Transgender Basics*, Cerulo's (1997) overview of identity construction, Nagoshi and Brzuzy's (2010) transgender theory article, and/or some combination of these sources to create a gender handout that includes "sex,"

“gender,” “gender identity,” “gender nonconformity,” “gender queer,” “transgender,” “transsexual,” “intersexed,” and “androgynous.” Make the handout available to students for the activity’s next two days because it supports the language construction portion of the rationale and the overall focus of the activity.

For day two, preview both aforementioned videos and post them online for the class, read *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), and, if possible, place a copy on library reserve. These resources emphasize the importance of gendered language and the social construction of gender. Therefore, while previewing them, focus on the ways in which Dyson’s parents and the interviewer use language to categorize Dyson into some larger collective identity, and pay special attention to how Dyson performs his gender identity and how others respond. Also, note how his performance is similar to gender nonconforming people presented in *Transgender Basics* and use the first handout as a guide.

For day three, preview *Ma Vie En Rose* (Scotta & Berliner, 1997), which examines the social construction of gender, identifies the limits of binary language that ostracize those who do not fit current gender norms, and promotes uncivil discourse. Then place a DVD copy on library reserve (\$20 cost) and create a worksheet that guides students’ viewing and asks them to: (1) distinguish Ludo’s (main character’s) sex and gender; (2) identify examples of how Ludo knows his sex; (3) provide examples of how Ludo performs femininity and masculinity when s/he is sure s/he identifies as a “boy” or a “girl”; and (4) discuss how the community and his family deal with his diagnosed gender identity disorder. Always refer to the initial handout as a discussion guide and use information from *Transgender Basics*, especially when analyzing how Ludo’s gender nonconformity is perceived as “troublesome” because of the strict language categories and norms people in the community have about how people should perform gender and how variations from these gender norms lead to assumptions about his sexuality.

Day 1 of In-class Activity

Using the gender handout created for day one, begin class discussion by distinguishing “sex” and “gender,” and introducing the terms “intersexed,” “androgynous,” and “gender nonconformity.” Continue class discussion of the “faulty” binary distinctions of “male and female” and “masculine and feminine” by using opposite arrows between each binary (e.g., masculine $\leftarrow\rightarrow$ feminine) to clarify the fluidity of gender performance that is key to understanding gender complexities and is essential for a social constructionist view of gender identity. Then distinguish “transgender” and “transsexual” using Brill and Pepper (2008), Nagoshi and Bruzuzy (2010), and Wood (2013), or another textbook. Next, explain how transgender and transsexual people may not use these same language or conceptual distinctions to form their collective identities because they may identify differently in their “in-groups” within the LGBTQ community, but that such variations encourage differing realities and promote a civil environment when interacting with people perceived as different. Then, focus this discussion on the stem of each concept and make connections to

“sex” and “gender,” and define “gender identity” as the “internalized, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither,” which emphasizes how gender is not directly connected to biology (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 4). While continuing class discussion, use examples from mediated and real-world experiences such as Chaz Bono, transgender athletes, or recent legal decisions (e.g., Coy Mathis). Finally, at the end of day 1, assign *My Princess Boy* and *Transgender Basics* for the next class discussion.

Day 2 of In-class Activity

Briefly review the previous class session, show the YouTube video clip of Cheryl Kilodavis being interviewed about her son Dyson, and discuss her book *My Princess Boy*. (If you do not desire this added expense, then ask students to provide media examples.) Lead discussion of Dyson’s gender identity, the perceptions many people of have of him, the words people use to define him, how his parents react, social expectations for boys in this culture, and how one’s sexual preference (romantic interest) is attached to these expectations. Remind students that identities can change over time and that the language used to define experiences colors how we experience similar interactions in the future. Then, connect the interview clip and children’s book to *Transgender Basics* to clarify further the collective gender identities presented. Continue with a discussion of “sex,” “gender,” “gender nonconformity,” and “gender identity.” Focus discussion on Dyson’s gender performance and how it “violates” cultural expectations for masculine behaviors associated with being a boy and how we might reconstruct what it means to be masculine while also asking whether we should be discussing children’s sexual preference (romantic interest) at such an early age. Next, discuss the messages presented in *My Princess Boy* and how they promote acceptance and civil discourse. Finally, assign *Ma Vie En Rose* (Scotta & Berliner, 1997), which is available in most public libraries, many college libraries, or Netflix, for homework.

Day 3 of In-class Activity

Once again review the first handout using your own examples or students’ examples from class or online discussion. Then, using the worksheet, lead discussion of the film and focus on Ludo’s sex and gender, how Ludo knows his sex and performs femininity and masculinity when s/he is sure s/he is a “boy” or “girl,” and discuss the community’s and family’s reactions to Ludo’s gender identity. Connect Ludo’s experience to the gender handout from day 1, *Transgender Basics*, and Dyson from earlier materials, especially as Ludo’s experience relates to gender nonconformity and transgender.

Debriefing

After each day of the activity, require students to use online forums to discuss class concepts, examples, or activities. While a goal of the activity is to promote civility, not everyone feels comfortable sharing personal information. If students experience

discomfort in publicly sharing personal information, then encourage them to work with familiar media examples. Sample questions for online forums may include, but are not limited to, the following and can be adapted for various course objectives.

- Day 1: How do you perceive your gender? How do you use gendered language? *or* How have cultural expectations influenced your notions of sex and gender? Give examples. *or* Describe how depictions or discussions of people's gender identity have been used in the media and whether you believe they have been used appropriately. Give examples.
- Day 2: How do others react to or influence gender identity? Explain how your gender identity has changed over time. *or* How does the language you or others use in discussing people's gender identity influence your perceptions of your own gender identity or that of others?
- Day 3: How and why does Ludo's gender identity change? *or* Explain the difficulties in categorizing Ludo's gender performance.

Instructors must, however, monitor forums for conceptual accuracy and probe students further with additional questions as needed.

Appraisal

Students typically mention this activity quite positively in end-of-semester course evaluations, in online class forums, and through emailed stories sent after the semester has ended. Most students indicate increased awareness of gender complexity and recognize the importance of this awareness in promoting civil discourse. Some acknowledge fears and anxieties in learning the material and ultimately resist them. The instructor's reminder of language's role in influencing our perceptions and the civility that emerges in broadening those perceptions through conceptual clarity are all keys to success. Despite some resistance, the majority find the overall experience insightful. Additionally, while some still struggle with the conceptual complexities, many are able to make distinctions more readily and engage in conversations with others. In fact, other semester-long coursework coupled with this activity is more wholly indicative of understanding and achievement of course objectives.

Limitations

One limitation is time. Instructors should commit to three semester-long days in a gender course for this to be successful, but variations are offered below. Another limitation is the instructor's comfort level with content and materials. A third limitation is students' prior knowledge and experience, and their ability to maintain, throughout the semester and beyond, conceptual distinctions. A fourth limitation is the requirement for students to accept these new conceptual distinctions in order to promote civility in the classroom. While I encourage them to think critically about gender binaries and essentialization, I do want them to leave the course with a general

understanding of language's powerful influence on our perceptions, especially on people who do not "fit" one category or differently view their collective identities. I also want students to recognize that new categories may continue to emerge as we accept the fluidity of gender identity and that this understanding encourages civil discourse. A fifth limitation is that students may not be ready to explore their own gender identities as required in the course, especially in public. To combat any fears they may have, each day of discussion allows for either personal or general responses to discussion questions so as not to force students to self-disclose. In fact, journals are a viable alternative.

Variations

If instructors can't dedicate three 75-minute class periods (or its equivalent) to the activity, then the conceptual and experiential distinctions between and among these complex concepts must be the focus, and the activity can be adapted to meet specific instructors' course needs and time frames. For example, if the instructor has only two class periods available, then I suggest skipping day 2 and moving from day 1 to day 3. Assign *Ma Vie En Rose* for outside of class, and leave in-class time for discussion of concepts and issues that assist in reaching the aforementioned objectives. I would not, however, suggest that the thorough discussion of concepts be ignored because offering more language possibilities for gender identity is important to the success of this activity and the further promotion of civility in interactions with those who are gender nonconforming.

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