PREFERRED PRONOUNS IN WRITING CENTER REPORTS

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I took this photo on March 31, 2016:

At that time, the Franklin and Marshall College Writing Center had only recently become aware of the frustration represented by this poster that urged the campus community to "Work to end cis-stemic oppression on campus." Just two weeks before, the center had introduced a policy of asking students for their preferred pronouns at the beginning of each tutoring session, to use in the reports for our own records and—with the students' permission—to send to their professors.

We instituted this policy because of a tutor's concern that we might be marginalizing members of our community by assuming gender and imposing the traditional male/female binary. That tutor, a member of Franklin and Marshall's Sexuality and Gender Alliance, suggested that by asking for preferred pronouns, we could recognize and show support for individuals who identify differently from that binary. In so doing, we wished to follow the example of Mandy Suhr-Sytsma and Shan-Estelle Brown:

By exposing and addressing the figures of speech that comprise the everyday language of oppression in writing centers, tutors can confront their own complicity in oppressive systems, challenge discourses that support oppression, and work toward more just and equitable relations within and beyond their centers. (18)

But what was the actual impact of the policy? Did we make any progress toward equality and justice, and at what cost? Here, I share results from a pilot study of students' reactions to being asked for their preferred pronouns. Hopefully, this work contributes to a discussion of issues surrounding gendered identity in writing centers, challenging the heteronormative narrative of what Harry C. Denny calls "mainstream, dominant expectations or roles," helping to "disrupt the hegemonic" in search of "revolutionary change" (94, 112).

Student Responses

After the end of the 2016 spring semester, I distributed an IRB-approved survey to all students who had visited the center since the policy began. The survey questions, which produced both qualitative and quantitative data, follow:

• Overall, how comfortable were you with being asked about your preferred pronouns? (Likert Scale 1-5)

• Overall, how well did you understand why you were being asked about your preferred pronouns? (Likert Scale 1-5)

• Overall, how positively or negatively do you perceive the Center's policy to ask tutees about their preferred pronouns? (Likert Scale 1-5)

• Would you describe your perception here? What, if any, positive effects resulted from the questions? What, if any, negative effects resulted from the questions?

• Do you recall your initial reaction to being asked about your preferred pronouns? If so, would you share that here?

- Do you have any suggestions for how to better implement the policy of asking tutees about their preferred pronouns?

At the end of the survey, I also invited students to be interviewed on the topic. The interview questions mostly provided opportunities to expand on survey responses. 59 of 336 students completed the survey. Five students volunteered for an interview.

Surveys

Answers to the questions producing quantitative data indicated an overall favorable response to the policy. Most students said that they were comfortable being asked for their preferred pronouns (71%), that they understood the reasons for the question (87%), and that they perceived the policy positively (60%). Unfavorable answers for these three questions were less than 17%.

Answers to the questions producing qualitative data were similarly supportive of the policy. A majority elaborated on the policy's positive effects, emphasizing its social significance and its practical usefulness: "In 2016 it's very important to ask for pronouns" and "I think it's helpful so that you can be sure to have a fluid conversation with your tutee about what really matters, the writing." A minority disagreed: "I don't really think this is necessary. If someone prefers specific pronouns, they can let the tutor know in advance" and "I believe that it encourages people to be silly, and that it leads people to respond inappropriately, which would only create/increase the self consciousness of anyone whom does identify in a more unorthodox way." Some responses were ambivalent, ambiguous, or indifferent.

Many made no suggestions on how better to implement the policy. Those who did mostly told us to move the question to the WCOnline registration form. Several exhorted us to explain the question in more detail. Several suggested we ask permission to ask the question in the first place. Some suggested we discontinue the policy.

Interviews

Again, the interviews mainly offered students the opportunity to expand on their answers to the survey questions. Interviewees used predominantly positive language—"really cool" and "really important"—to describe their perceptions of the policy. One emphasized the value of the policy in "normalizing the idea that gender isn't a binary and that it is often in flux, and that choosing a pronoun is very much a representation of choosing who you are as opposed to you being defined by your gender." All interviewees indicated that they understood the policy, though one suggested the center should provide more information about the policy on its website. No interviewees indicated discomfort with being asked for their preferred pronouns. However, two said they were concerned about the possibility of putting pressure on students who might not want to identify their preferred pronouns: "That's essentiality asking them to out themselves." One urged us to make the question optional and stressed the importance of "creating a safe space with options for exits."

Responding to the Responses

In this final section, I will share our reflection and action in response to the feedback, especially the less favorable feedback, since constructive criticism is often the most useful for further growth. The most common negative effect of the policy mentioned was confusion. However, students mostly indicated that the confusion was cleared up without trouble. Even when it wasn't, they simply proceeded with the session. Still, to address the concern, we have followed the suggestions to provide more information about the policy on our website, though we wonder how many students access this information before a session.

We have also followed suggestions to incorporate the policy into our WCOnline registration form, which now asks students to indicate "Preferred Gender Pronouns." We believe this change addresses another critical concern: that students might feel put on the spot when asked about preferred pronouns and gender identity. Because they have already been asked, we believe students will feel less pressure. However, we do not believe this adjustment is adequate because students may identify differently in different circumstances, preferring one set of pronouns in an online form and another with professors or fellow students. Furthermore, choices may change between filling out the form and the session. Confirming students' preferred pronouns during the sessions is necessary to avoid misidentifying anyone. It also acknowledges the potential for fluidity in identity—what Denny calls occupying "positions on continua" (99).

Similarly, we are not comfortable with the suggestion to make the question optional. Asking whether students want to share their pronouns might actually increase the pressure by making refusal seem uncooperative, further stigmatizing nonconformity. And if the answer is no, what would we put in our reports? We would either have to use proper names or "the student" throughout report—which would be awkward and more consistent with medical than

educational writing practice; or, we would have to make an assumption about the student's gender, which would defeat the purpose of the policy in the first place. In both cases, we would be doing what Suhr-Sytsma and Brown call "avoid[ing] discussing difference" and "eras[ing] difference" (22). We choose instead to "clarify meaning together," even at the risk of occasionally causing discomfort (Suhr-Sytsma and Brown 22).

Also, perhaps some level of discomfort is not necessarily inappropriate. Jay Sloan suggests so, challenging the idea of "comfort-zone" tutoring: "If the writing center is ever to help students negotiate 'the more troubling areas of confrontation and difference,' it is vital that we not let our devotion to our clients' 'comfort' blind us to their real intellectual needs" (70). Hence our rejection of one student's assertion that the policy may contribute to "the destruction of the English language [. . .] [which,] once pronoun usage becomes mutilated[,] will never again return to normalcy." While we recognize that some may feel frustration and anxiety about changing conventions, languages do evolve; we believe that we must engage with the ongoing linguistic shift, and that our engagement may prompt learning, despite or maybe even because of the discomfort.

Then again, there are some kinds of discomfort that seem important to avoid. We acknowledge and share the concern about the pressure possibly felt by students who hesitate to identify themselves so personally in so public a setting. Here, the issue is not avoiding the "comfort-based" tutoring Sloan opposes, but exercising caution in recognizing and respecting individuals' rights to privacy. One possibility might be phrasing the question differently. Instead of asking, "What are your preferred pronouns?" we might ask, "What pronouns would you prefer us to use in our reports?" In the former case, we would be asking for a very personal, perhaps intrusive identification. In the latter case, we would be asking for a practical and public identification. Doing so, we might avoid appearing invasive, yet also affirm the value of what Denny calls "challeng[ing] what's natural or not, conventional or not" (111).

As we continue refining the policy, we should remember that most students indicated strong support for it. Though there are costs and risks, most students agree with us, as we agree with Denny, that it is best "to err on the side of consciousness-raising and problem-posing, to make a space for positioning what we believe and challenging what otherwise might seem commonsense" (88). Maybe the most moving responses came from individuals who do not themselves identify differently from the traditional gender binary, but who nonetheless emphasized the value of confronting that binary. One wrote:

> I think it's positive to make everyone aware of the fact that there are people who don't identify with the assumed pronouns. As a cis female, that is not an issue that I have ever experienced, but I have a friend who has, and by being asked, I was forced to think about it a little bit from a different perspective. It gave me a tiny insight into what it's like to need to think about pronouns every day.

This response perfectly captures our overall perception of the policy: the predominantly positive and the problematic. We would rather no one feel "forced" to do anything, and we will keep considering ways to temper such potentially negative impressions. Yet such insight into this important issue is exactly what we wished to achieve, for ourselves, and for all the members of the Franklin and Marshall community, however they may identify.

Works Cited

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