

6 Transing Communication Education

A Chorus of Voices

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At a roundtable discussion during the 2015 meeting of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender, feminist scholars Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Bren Murphy posed several questions to inspire conversation and future research, including “What article from a feminist perspective would you like to read in our journals?” Participants in the conversation talked about a number of topics either that have begun to emerge in communication scholarship or that we hope to see in the near future. Gender identity came up as a topic repeatedly in the conversation, with participants noting that in communication classrooms and journals, even those explicitly focused on gender, gender identity often gets marginalized, tokenized, or excluded all together (see also, Spencer “Introduction”).

Inspired by the conference panel, our own conviction that traditional approaches to gender in communication education should give more careful and sustained attention to the particularities of gender identity and transgender lives,¹ and the recent *Communication Education* forum calling for more research on diversity in communication education research (Hendrix et al.; Spencer and Capuzza) this chapter brings together the voices of several communication scholars at various stages in our careers to discuss the potential of *transing* communication education. “Transing” is a process of examining gender embodiment within and across other human differences thus calling into question dominant discourses that construct cultural assumptions about body normativity (Chávez; Stryker, Currah and Moore). We draw on Yep, Russo, and Allen’s provocative definition:

[transing] unpacks underlying relations of power within specific cultural, geopolitical, and historical contexts from a universalizing perspective which maintains that gender is a critical concern for *all* individuals inhabiting various positions in the gender system (e.g., gender normative and gender non-normative people in a given culture). (70)

We aver that centering gender identity and transgender lives in communication education makes our classrooms and research agendas more

complete and more honest in the narrative they tell about the role of gender identity in human communication. More importantly, when we teach and write about communication from a trans-centric perspective, we co-create, with our students and colleagues, classrooms and journals that are more just.

To advance our claims, we begin this chapter with a review of scholarship in communication and related fields about gender identity in higher education, exploring the differences between an additive versus trans-centric approach, explaining various scholarly rationales for this work, and considering pedagogical strategies and resources for transing higher education.² This chapter captures the dialogue among scholars to date who have begun the important work of formulating transgender pedagogies. Next, we describe action research, our method for this study that involves implementing changes in our educational practices, reflecting on those changes, and making adjustments for the future. We then offer brief narratives from each of our individual experiences, respectively, as a dean reflecting on previous attempts at transing communication education, three current faculty members and one graduate teaching assistant reporting on our efforts in recent undergraduate courses, and a graduate student who transes his graduate education from within by centering gender identity in each seminar he takes. We hope that these narratives bridge critical communication pedagogies and transgender studies and thus write with both communication and gender studies educators in mind. Our collectively authored conclusion traces themes among our stories, including those related to theorizing transgender pedagogy within our field as well as those related to praxis—how best to teach about transgender issues and current events from a communication perspective and how to best equip our students to question and challenge institutional barriers and oppressions pertaining to transgender lives within the academy.

Scholars have called for both the incorporation of transgender studies research in college curricula and for the adoption of trans-friendly pedagogies across a variety of disciplines. Some scholars have argued for an additive approach that would incorporate the experiences of transgender people into a course unit as a complement to other course topics. In contrast, other scholars have argued for a trans-centric approach that would integrate this work into the structure of the entire course as its own legitimate topic of inquiry. Among the first to make a case for the latter, Beauchamp and D'Harlingue argued:

To this effect, we shift away from an additive model, in which transgender bodies and identities are assigned their own separate unit. We suggest instead that discussions of transgender bodies and subjects can and should be integrated throughout an introductory women and gender studies course. (27)

Some instructors concluded that transgender studies content fits best in courses on women's, gender, feminist, sexuality, or transgender studies while other instructors argue on behalf of widening this domain to create a broad trans-inclusive curriculum. For example, Drabinski noted, "Teaching transgender studies is often assumed to fall under the purview of gender and women's studies programs," and warned in this approach, "transgender studies risks being ghettoized in a women's studies curriculum" (10). Naturally scholars from women's, gender, and sexuality studies pioneered in calling for a trans-centric perspective for curriculum development and for trans-friendly pedagogy; however, scholars from other fields of study have followed suit, challenging themselves and calling on their colleagues to embrace this project. The fact that such challenges have been issued time and again across a variety of fields illustrates both the multidisciplinary nature of transgender studies and the importance of its contributions to human inquiry; moreover, trans studies contributes to social justice efforts in that it critiques systems of oppression and works toward human liberation, ultimately in the service of making trans lives more livable.

Compared to these other fields, communication's rallying call came later and initially appeared outside the journals of our field. In one of the earliest works that focused specifically on transgender lives, Lovaas, Baroudi, and Collins discussed the relevance of queer theory and critical pedagogy in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, offering specific strategies for instructors addressing "trans-anxieties" and trans prejudice in classroom dialogues. McGrath warned against conflating sex and gender in gender and communication courses or courses with a gender unit and encouraged instructors to help students confront misconceptions about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations. Fox advocated for a pedagogy that "queers instructional communication and communication about instruction" (62) though, again, he focused primarily on sexuality rather than transgender identities. Calling for a broader approach, Spencer and Capuzza argued, "A token class period, unit or even one course devoted to gender diversity only reifies cisnormativity by contributing to the notion that such materials are outside the 'normal' curriculum," and they encouraged instructors to centralize the teaching of histories, issues, and practices of transgender lives across a wide range of courses. Such a focus begins to equip students with the means of challenging all forms of gender policing (115). As this book went to press, communication scholars Benny LeMaster and Amber Johnson co-edited a special issue of *Communication Teacher* focused on trans pedagogy.

Much of this literature moves beyond the call for incorporating transgender research into our courses and for adopting trans-friendly pedagogies to develop various rationales for this important work. At the most basic level, scholars sought to engage colleagues in the work of updating their fields of study to reflect advances in transgender studies

(Green; McCarthy; Rands; Wentling et al.). Authors also forwarded the rationale that such work would empower educators to create safe spaces for students—but safe here means feeling free to ask questions, make mistakes and learn to do better next time, and disagree civilly (Furrow; Gorski et al.; Lovaas et al.; Pino and Blazek; Rands; Spencer; Spencer and Kulbaga). Many scholars expressed a desire to help students develop critical thinking skills in order to question stereotypes, eliminate biases, and challenge the limits of binary thinking and gender essentialism (Agid and Rand; Barrios; Courvant; Drabinski; McCarthy; McGrath; Pino and Blazek). Some educators argued on behalf of integrating material so as to normalize transgender issues while other educators argued against “normalizing” transgender identity and expression, preferring rather to challenge norms and avoid creating a new binary, that between transgender and cisgender identities. Still other educators went a step further, arguing such work constitutes an opportunity to encourage students to pursue a social justice agenda (Agid and Rand; Barrios; Preston).

Recognizing that we all teach transgender students and that cisnormativity is deeply rooted in both the inner working of our pedagogical practices and higher education at the institutional level, other experts focused their attention on envisioning and implementing a trans-friendly pedagogy—related to queer pedagogy, but more specific in its explicit focus on gender identity. Researchers have recommended a wide variety of specific pedagogical strategies and overall approaches. These recommendations focused on the use of writing and films as a pedagogical tools (Beauchamp and D’Harlingue; Drabinski; Furrow; Lovaas et al.; Nicolazzo; Preston); dealing with student discomfort and reducing trans anxiety (Lovaas et al.; Preston); using students’ names and pronouns correctly (Beauchamp and D’Harlingue; Green); and helping students distinguish transgender from transsexual as well as sexuality from gender (McGrath).

Other researchers offered broad frameworks within which to make pedagogical choices, including a framework of social justice. Many educators adapted a feminist framework. For example, Beauchamp and D’Harlingue suggested, “Rather than asking questions about transgender bodies specifically, more productive teaching methods might turn those questions back upon themselves, effectively denaturalizing *all* gendered bodies” (41). Other educators supported critical pedagogy, or “education with the purpose of empowering and liberating individuals to transform social structures of inequity and oppression” (Lovaas et al. 181; see also, Gorski; Nicolazzo; Preston).

Several scholars debated the merits of using transgender guest speakers as a pedagogical option. Green and Wentling et al. provided advice for transgender guest speakers and for preparing student audiences appropriately for such visits. An entire issue of the journal *Radical Teacher* explored the “invited guest” model and found it problematic because it often limits the trans experience to coming out narratives,

homogenizes the trans experience, and lacks depth of analysis, among other concerns (Agid and Rand; Courvant; Drabinski; Preston). Courvant warned that the:

lazy use of personal stories and inexpert speakers leads to trans persons being effectively left out of topics and courses even when they appear to be included. Worse, as the inexpert (though frequently entertaining) trans guest typically tells a coming out story regardless of the course topic, students ostensibly encountering trans persons in many different contexts in fact repeatedly study the same things. (32)

In addition to transgender studies curriculum development and pedagogical challenges, researchers have acknowledged the need for course materials that support transgender inclusivity (Devor and Matte). In particular, there is a need for textbooks that appropriately address a range of transgender issues and theories (Beauchamp and D’Harlingue; Macgillivray and Jennings).

Experiences, challenges, and perspectives of transgender professors and students in the classroom have received some scholarly attention (Furrow; Jennings; Pryor). Faculty need various forms of support from colleagues and administrators, and students need to see themselves represented in course syllabi, be called on by their professors appropriately, feel supported in asking questions or making mistakes, and learn about gender identity in courses not necessarily about gender and sexuality as well as in courses that do have such a focus.

This review of literature pushed us beyond an additive model, focused our approach on the historical processes that produce a range of gender identities, supplied us with useful theoretical frameworks, and provided helpful advice on practical matters such as pedagogical choices and course materials. We hope to build on the excellent work already published in cognate areas so as to highlight the connections between critical communication pedagogy and transgender studies in a way that deeply considers implications for our classrooms and campuses. More specifically, we aim to share how we educate students about transgender identities, expression, events, and issues from a communication perspective. Moreover, we aim to share how we encourage cisgender students to see their own privilege and to equip students with the tools and motivation required to challenge cisnormativity and to address social injustices in the form of institutional barriers and oppression within higher education related to transgender lives. Because our goals for this chapter required us to reflect critically on our own practice and make adjustments and adaptations based on our successes and growing edges, we turn to an explanation of action research as our method.

Action research, frequently used in scholarship on education, focuses on pragmatism. The method’s goal centers on improving practice. Action

research involves implementing some change or innovation, monitoring its results, and then starting over, in a sense, by making adjustments to the original intervention based on what one learned from the outcomes; communication scholars have used it in contexts such as public advocacy and argumentation and feminist pedagogy (Mitchell; Spencer).

In this chapter, we invoke a creative appropriation of action research that works differently for each of us. Some of us engaged in action research explicitly while for others the process of change and development over time unfolded more organically. This approach encourages self-reflexivity and self-transformation. Our narratives come from our experience in the communication classroom and are a testament to the importance of praxis in pedagogy. Some of us report on our first or second time teaching such a course from a trans-centric approach, while one of us has taught more than 30 sections of the class. One of us now works as a dean and shares a reflective retrospective about early attempts to teach from a trans-centric perspective. And one of us does not teach but actively *transes* communication education as a participant in graduate seminars that might otherwise marginalize or ignore gender identity. Taken together, our narratives reflect theoretically on pedagogical practices, illustrate what worked and what we would (or did) try differently next time, or both. We offer these varied experiences and innovations with the hope not only that our own communication classes might become more trans-centric, but that other instructors will join us in transing communication classrooms.

Narratives

Sarah

At my institution, the gender and communication course is taught by a cadre of instructors and graduate students whose programs of study and scholarship are intimately rooted in critical approaches to human communication relative to studies of difference, gender, and sexuality. Using Linde and Edson's edited volume, *The Process of Gender*, the course comprises six units: The Process of... (1) Defining Gender; (2) Becoming Gendered; (3) Communicating Gender; (4) Examining Gendered Violence; (5) Understanding Gendered Social Systems; and (6) Critiquing Gender. By fostering a focus on gender as a process and identity as a spectrum, the course challenges social assumptions about gender.

I have taught five sections of the course thus far, both in person and online, and I affirm the absolute necessity of courses that center gender identity rather than marginalizing gender identity (especially trans³ identity) to a particular week or guest speaker. Each semester, I begin by telling the students, "This class is not so much about learning, but about *unlearning*—becoming aware of those largely unconscious gendered

phenomena that undergird our everyday communication practices." For most, this is a foreign concept; they come to college to *learn*, not the other way around. "I can't promise that this class will make your life easier," I go on, to the suspicion of many a raised eyebrow. "I suspect that it will instead make life harder, as you will no longer be able to *not* notice certain social assumptions, misperceptions, and power dynamics. But the goal is for you to leave being a more critical consumer of the world."

By and large, students achieve this goal. While the course only takes on its gender identity-centric focus beginning in the second unit (introducing the concept of gender as an identity and as existing on a spectrum, and formation of that identity as a process), it is infused in every facet of the remaining material, allowing students to problematize the presentation, marginalization, and active subordination of particular identities. They leave intensely frustrated by online forms and medical documentation that ask for "gender" but only provide options for "male" and "female," terms which not only denote sex and not gender, but reinforce sex and gender binaries. They question the ways in which the hidden curriculum has manifested throughout their primary, secondary, and higher education experiences—why they never before learned of how the early gay liberation movement has become faceless and whitewashed, ignoring the contributions of trans* people of color like Sylvia Rivera.

Yet with each experience teaching this course, there is room for critique and growth. Indeed, I have noticed that all too often, attention to trans* identities still fall into a binary, with expectations for "passing" and pronoun use bifurcated along male-female lines. Thus, every semester, every week, and often every class session, I recalibrate the content and my presentation.

Along the way, certain dilemmas have arisen: When students misgender or dead name transpeople, do I model or correct? Is facilitating class introductions by asking for students' gender pronouns inclusive and progressive, or does it risk publicly outing those students who know no other reality than gendered oppression and desperately need to discover first that their instructor identifies as an ally? How does my own opinion take form, if at all? This spring, I made the pedagogical decision to model appropriate language; I gave students a choice about whether to disclose their pronouns, and I only offered my own opinion on course readings when students asked for it.

In an undergraduate communication course on gender, I have found a structure that details definitions and theories pertaining to sex and gender, gender identities and socialization, verbal and nonverbal properties of gender in relationships, gendered properties of educational and organizational systems, and the rhetorical function of gendered social movements to be most successful. Yet even amidst this structure, the gender communication classroom is a curated space for students to discover

their own path to an understanding of gendered communication. As bell hooks urged in her National Women's Studies Association keynote speech, there is great value in a caring and critically engaged community—I believe that a gender identity-centric curriculum inclusive of the aforementioned methods provides the undergraduate student community with the ability to be that caring, critically engaged community.

Lucy

As a transgender woman, scholar, and teacher, gender identity is especially relevant to my research, teaching, and lived experience. My transgender identity has shaped my experience of being in the classroom, from concerns in the early years of my transition about how students would react to me, to having to take extra steps to make sure that the digital identity assigned to me by the university matches how I present myself, and to my students to taking pleasure in being a part of animated discussions over issues of discrimination and oppression. Gender courses in communication have been the frequent site of these discussions, and my experience has shown me the value of centering gender identity in these courses.

When I have the opportunity to teach gender courses, gender identity is often centered from my research and lived experience. One of the main focuses of my research has been on the constructed nature of transgender representation in film and other media, so when we discuss media in class, I encourage my students to consider the conscious decisions that are made in producing media content, from the numerous times the camera lingers on Megan Fox's butt in the *Transformers* films to the dearth of non-White guests on Sunday morning news programs, in order to help them resist the idea that the media just present a record of the world as it exists. From my lived experience, I am very sensitive to and aware of news stories affecting transgender people, such as the recent spate of anti-transgender bathroom bills like North Carolina's HB 2, so I often draw on this knowledge when providing examples in class, such as using the defeat of Houston's anti-discrimination ordinance in 2015 and efforts by transgender activists to raise awareness of the implications of such legislation centered around the #wejustneedtopee hashtag to discuss cultural constructions of gender. I also often make reference to my own experiences, such as being policed when using the restroom or a changing room in a department store or the restrictions I would face on campus if my state passed a bill similar to North Carolina's, given the current presence of only one gender-neutral restroom on the entire campus.

I have found that the primary benefit of such centering of gender identity is that students are able to think more critically about gender issues. Framing gender courses around the differences between men and women only serves to reinforce the gender binary and stifle discussion. Cisgender men and women may feel unqualified to contribute to

discussion or even ask questions on topics that do not relate directly to them, and transgender and gender-nonconforming students may feel left out entirely. Centering gender identity can be as simple as not relying exclusively on examples related to cisgender men and women and by continually reinforcing the socially constructed nature of gender, even when discussing communication patterns ascribed to a specific gender in our society. Doing so encourages students to interrogate all aspects of gender in society so that a cisgender man feels comfortable asking questions about the tampon tax in place in most states instead of staying quiet because it does not relate to him directly, and a cisgender woman feels comfortable sharing her experience with gender-biased questions during a job interview instead of assuming that gender was irrelevant in that situation. I have found in my teaching that encouraging this kind of critical thinking about identity extends beyond just gender as students learn to apply a critical intersectional lens. A few weeks into teaching a gender course one semester, a racist incident occurred on campus, and because the course had been structured around privilege and the socially constructed nature of identity, my students were able to engage in a productive discussion over the incident and the community's response as a reflection of the mutually constituted character of racism and cissexism as systems of oppression. Students responded to the lack of support from the community as a whole felt by their Black and Latina classmates and thought through the implications of their tolerance of certain artifacts of whiteness. Centering gender identity encourages such critical thinking; doing so refuses to enable cisgender students in thinking that they already have everything figured out as it relates to gender, particularly as gender intersects with other axes of difference, power, and privilege.

matthew

Un-centering Gender Identity

trepidation tenses my muscles

as i quickly lift my fingers from the keyboard to avoid a rash response to an online discussion post doubting my very existence

i will a blush out of my face

feeling my words between an inexplicable inner truth, political imperatives & an open quest for knowledge

I find the most challenging aspects of "teaching gender" to lie in the negotiation of identity politics and power dynamics. Whether I teach an undergraduate course in interpersonal communication face-to-face or a graduate online course in intercultural and international communication, I now invariably teach from the perspective of a scholar who publicly transitioned. Even if I approach instruction of the course as a facilitator interested in dialogue rather than an expert on the stage, my

embodied knowledge guides my pedagogy. This means that I'm both actively seeking to center and un-center gender identity. I seek to center my students' sense of gender identity, which still often begins by helping them become aware of the degree to which unquestioned assumptions govern much of our thinking. I seek to un-center my own gender identity because it cannot and should not become the focus of the course. This is easy to theorize and difficult to enact.

Given the unprecedented degree of public visibility of trans and gender diverse people, integrating readings, guest lectures, or videos/podcasts about their experiences does not require justification, at least not in my context. It's the facilitation of discussion and the need not to compartmentalize this topic that poses challenges. Like many trans-identified educators, I often find that I still need to provide a basic overview of gender non-conforming identities, also known as Trans 101. I gave a guest lecture on transgender communication needs in a graduate course comprised mostly of international students which was well received but seemed to create a sense of compassion, which has the potential to re-inforce stereotypes of trans and gender diverse people as victims and to thereby reinscribe marginalization. A student thanked me for my courage, which requires the delicate act of me then thanking the student for the act of engaging the lecture while critiquing the notion of bravery without undermining truly marginalized trans people.

i feel so I
trans tattooed
conceptually naked in front of you
my version of being just one of billions
wanting you to trace tears
recognizing their uniqueness
as much as their ubiquity

A student offers the example of a transgender nephew in an online discussion of support for gender diverse youth, arguing for the need for early "treatment." This requires the delicate act of acknowledging his and his nephew's experience while raising questions about the discourse of disease without undermining political efforts to enable youth access to medical care.

A cisgender discussion group participant divests himself from gender oppression by declaring that he uses male pronouns, requiring the delicate act of acknowledging his dialogic intention while critiquing the notion of an even semantic playing field without disempowering those who rely on such symbolic gestures to feel safe. A cisgender male student offers that he accepts my masculinity as much as his own, requiring the delicate act of accepting the invitation while destabilizing the taken-for-granted nature of masculinity without centering my own complicated and contradictory sense of self.

I don't always have the energy for so many delicate acts.

I want to move on from delicate acts and the diplomacy of teaching to uncensored exchanges and the efficacy of unsafe learning.

Viviane Namaste convincingly argues that learning is not, and cannot be, safe. She writes:

If your visual presentation is not easily categorized as male or female, the world is not safe. For trans people of all sorts, the world is complicated and messy – sometimes violent, sometimes chaotic, often confusing, and frequently filled with joy and random acts of kindness, beauty, and love. But this world is anything but "safe." Trans people need to know, understand, and recognize this as a point of departure. In fact, *all of us* in the world need to think about the real world in this way. That is not an easy lesson to learn, and it comes with much anxiety, fear, and pain. (143)

As an educator, I continue to work toward a pedagogy that has all students realize the centrality of gender without reducing it to a tragically hip wardrobe of gender creative garments or inflating it to a politically correct litmus test of understanding reality. Such pedagogy requires risks and a constant awareness of the inherent instability of ways of thinking about the human experience.

TJ

While the other contributors to this chapter each lend their perspectives as instructors in communication classrooms, I offer the perspective of a doctoral student in the classroom. At the time of writing, I have not yet begun my teaching responsibilities, yet even in my current capacity I have found myself able to shape (in part) the lens through which gender identity has been considered. In particular, by challenging the cisnormative and binaristic tendencies of social science research I have helped redirect conversations and interrogate assumptions such that colleagues and instructors have taken special care to consider and articulate perspectives that reject sexual essentialism and instead acknowledge self-determined gender identities.

Communication scholars and our colleagues in related fields have been rightly criticized for our treatment of transgender topics in rhetorical, qualitative-critical, and (specifically quantitative) social science research. While critical work theorizes transgender identities at the expense of the material issues facing transgender persons (Namaste; Ryan), social science research collapses the complexities of transgender existence into easily legible, but artificially standardized forms (Labuski and Keo-Meier). Yet (quantitative) social science research also provides rich means of exploring the materiality of transgender life that is so often

ignored in work of primarily theoretical orientations (Labuski and Keo-Meier). Thus, pushing social science-oriented colleagues to acknowledge and account for transgender lives, while also pushing them to reject the natural inclination toward artificial standardization, serves to address the shortcomings of academic inquiries into transgender issues by educating the future producers of such work.

Lacking the authority of an instructor in the classroom, however, my strategies have not been strictly pedagogical. Rather, I have seized the opportunities afforded by our student-focused seminars to center transgender identity as a topic of discussion as a participant. Specifically, I have challenged both instructors and colleagues in seminar discussions by identifying, critiquing, and offering alternatives to cisnormative and binaristic logics. Further, I have used the development of my own research projects for coursework as opportunities to illustrate the underlying tensions pertaining to gender identity in social science research more broadly, inviting conversations that engage the classroom in critical dialogue about these tensions and their potential resolutions. For example, in developing a psychometric scale with which to measure attitudes toward transgender men and women (Billard "Attitudes") during a graduate seminar, conversations centering on the inherent transphobia of past scales (see Billard "Crisis") and the limits of quantitative measurement in contexts of evolving cultural norms were able to emerge.

The influence of these strategies is seen in the tone and content of seminar discussions, in which instructors and colleagues have begun reflexively considering gender identity. Even when describing the findings of past non-gender-inclusive survey research, for example, instructors comment that "the gender options were reduced to a binary male-female option for the purpose of this study" or colleagues note that "the researchers did not provide participants with multiple options to identify their gender." While the research discussed in these contexts does not itself challenge binaristic or cisnormative logics, these subtle lexical choices on the part of instructors and colleagues signify a larger cultural and conceptual shift in the classroom relating to gender identity. Moreover, colleagues frequently request assistance in the design of their own studies for coursework, inquiring, for example, how best to construct inclusive gender identification questions, even when the objectives of their studies have no necessary relation to gender identity.

Thus, in challenging instructors and colleagues to rethink the ways gender is considered in most social science research, and their own future work, I have in part contributed to the evolution of a new classroom and research culture in which the default assumptions of cisnormativity and the gender binary are rejected, or at least questioned. Yet, these efforts are not without their limits. First, as I am not an instructor, but rather a student, my ability to shape the classroom culture and conversational flow is fairly restricted (right now). While I can use my contributions to the collective

conversation to raise issues of gender identity, these contributions pale in comparison to the power of crafting syllabi and seminar sessions held by instructors. Moreover, my ability to challenge the prevailing norms of social science work is subject to the permissiveness of my instructors, who may or may not allow such challenges. Additionally, my strategies do not entirely resist the critiques of academic treatment of transgender topics. Though they challenge sexual essentialism and advocate the legitimation of self-determined gender identities, they in some ways sustain the objectivism of the social sciences and permit the concretization of transgender subjectivities. Nonetheless, my strategies have been successful in challenging both instructors and colleagues to reject the cisnormative and binaristic tendencies of social science research, to reconceptualize gender identity in more inclusive and more fluid ways, and to make gender identity more salient in areas in which binary gender is traditionally simply assumed.

Tristan

As a teaching associate during my doctoral studies, and now as a full-time instructor, I have taught an upper division gender and communication course 38 times, but I never tire of it. This is my favorite course to teach, given that it intersects with the focus of my research on the rhetoric of marginalized social identities across the spectrum of gender, sex, and sexuality. Because I am inclined to view all gender subject matter from the perspective of identity, I have always emphasized identity and rhetorical strategy in teaching this course.

First, I should point out that any discussion of trans identities at the undergraduate level is apt to generate some exaggerated comments on student course evaluations. There are often one or two students per class who complain that the course had been "all about transgenders," conveniently overlooking the fact that well over half the course material was devoted to cisgender men and women. Because of this, I'm sorry to say, some untenured instructors in particular might be wise to think strategically in terms of the amount and scheduling of trans-related materials and class discussions in a gender and communication course. For example, while my syllabus indicates that this subject will be covered, I do not begin the course by emphasizing trans identities. When taking attendance on the first day, I call out last names only, asking students to state what they wish to be called, and explaining that some students may prefer nicknames. In doing this, I am disguising my actual intention, which is to allow trans students to prevent their classmates from hearing an inappropriately gendered name, as listed on the official roster.

The course begins with gender development theories (e.g., social learning, cognitive development) and a study describing how preschool teachers enforce gendered norms (Martin). This makes clear to my students

that young children cannot escape gendered programming, neither at home nor at school. We then watch videotaped interviews with young children who demonstrate that they have already learned many stereotypes about how differently gendered people *should* dress and behave. I also run segments from the television series *What Would You Do?*, a hidden-camera show that tests everyday people in unusual circumstances. These are very popular with the class and generate a great deal of discussion. One depicts a father and son in a toy store, with the young son begging his father for a Barbie doll. In the other, set in a Halloween costume shop, a boy wants a princess costume, while a girl wants to be Spiderman. In all cases, the parents (actors) have been instructed to refuse these requests and express their worry and concern as they interact with other customers. As it turns out, most of those customers side with the parents. In our class discussion, then, there are often widely differing opinions, and it gets the students thinking about children who do not fit the traditional gender norms.

Within the first third of the semester, I introduce the topic of intersex, spending significant time on infant intersex surgeries, making comparisons to the David Reimer case, and showing the entire BBC *Horizon* documentary about Reimer's life (O'Connell). Reimer was not intersex, but on the advice of doctors, Reimer was raised as a girl from the age of two after a botched circumcision; later in his life, he learned about this history and began identifying as David. It is useful to precede discussion of trans identities with this, I believe, because intersex births, as well as accidents suffered by normatively male children such as Reimer, deal with the sex of the body and its relationship to identity. If some students begin the course thinking that trans identity is a mental illness, simply telling them otherwise will not likely succeed. However, intersex infants have no control over their bodily configurations at birth. Therefore, if one is born with both sexes, that individual's gender identification has no obvious norm to follow or defy. Students will likely accept that such an individual might identify as a boy, as a girl, or somewhere in-between. In this way, it becomes less of a mental leap to accept gender identities that are not in traditional correspondence with physical sex. However, I do not follow discussion of intersex with a transgender unit. Rather, transgender identities are addressed in a few readings throughout the remainder of the course, and sometimes come up organically in class discussions.

The last third of the semester includes articles on "gendered social systems" (Linde and Edson 223), such as gender in sports, gender in the workplace, gender in media, gendered violence, gender in religion, and gender within the family. Most of these do not address trans identities, although the Squires and Brouwer article devotes considerable discussion to the case of Brandon Teena, a trans man whose "friends" raped and later murdered him when they discovered that he was trans. I end the gendered social systems unit with Norwood's article on family

members' reactions to a relative's transition, followed by the final unit on "communicating gender."

Throughout the semester we had, of course, been discussing the ways in which we all communicate gender, framed as rhetorical choices with the goal of "persuading" others to see us as particular types of gendered people (Booth). This last unit expands on that, introducing a magazine article written by a woman who presented herself as a man in public spaces for one week in order to learn more about the functioning of gendered norms (Gilbert). Here, I ask the students to make lists of all the things they would need to do, or do differently, if they were to engage in a similar week-long experiment. How would they alter their appearance? How would they speak? With whom would they interact? What would they hope to learn?

This unit ends with a portion of an autobiographical essay of my own. While many instructors invite transpersons to class as guest speakers, I take advantage of my own presence as a gay man who also happens to have a transsexual medical history. This is the only class I teach in which I answer personal questions, allowing students to ask about the types of trans-related issues that had not thus far been addressed in the course. By this point in the semester, I often experience heterosexual cisgender male students coming up to me after class to shake my hand, leaving me feeling that I must have accomplished something.

I often end the semester by showing and critically analyzing "The Outcast," an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Taylor and Scheerer), inviting students to interpret as well as criticize the writing and production of this gender-focused story about a planet where identification with *any* gender is considered an illness that is cured via "psychotectic therapy." This is a norm-reversal storyline, eliciting sympathy, not for a transgender character, but for an alien woman who is forced to hide her gender identity, as well as her attraction to a cisgender human male.

Throughout this course, I continually ask students to reflect on their own classroom experience. How do they express their own gender identities to others, and what are their expectations for how others should be expressing gender? How would they react if their own children expressed gender outside of cultural norms? How would they raise intersex children? How would they feel if their own family members transitioned? In this way, even when we are discussing articles about cisgender men and women, these types of questions seem to linger in the mind, sometimes prompting students to bring up the subject of transgender identities before I do.

Jamie

As the 2015–16 academic year approached, I created a plan for transing two of my courses. The experience of transing the first course, "Gender, Communication and Society," allowed me to revise the second course,

“Identity, Media and Power.” I undertook this work from the privileged position of a cisgender tenured professor.

My plan for teaching from a trans-centric perspective combined two approaches, transgender studies and critical pedagogy (Drabinski; Simpson). The first approach incorporated course material about the historical, social, and cultural conditions that affect transgender lives. The second goal moved beyond filling in a knowledge gap to an interrogation of social structures that engender all of us and of the role communication plays in generating and policing various transgender identities and expressions. My learning objectives included to develop (1) awareness of gender oppression, transphobia, and cisnormativity; (2) knowledge of transgender issues, histories, and transgender studies theory; and (3) critical thinking skills by applying “transgender” as a category of analysis for exploring gender assumptions.

“Gender, Communication and Society” is structured as a survey course with a foundational unit followed by units on rhetorical, nonverbal, interpersonal, organizational, and intercultural contexts. “Identities, Media and Power” is structured with a foundational unit followed by units on media representations of various minorities and women, possible effects of these representations on audiences, and how to challenge misrepresentations. Each unit included course material about transgender identities and expression and attempted to do so in an integrated manner that did not exoticize, tokenize, marginalize, or privilege one monolithic transgender identity.

The foundational unit of both courses included key vocabulary, a brief history of gender studies scholarship, an overview of gender assumptions (e.g., gender stability, gender essentialism, sex/gender congruency, and gender binary), various approaches to the study of gender (e.g., biological, psychological, cultural, social, and historical), and an exploration of gender studies theories. I incorporated material related to transgender identity by adding vocabulary such as “transgender,” “cisgender,” “genderqueer,” “transphobia,” and “transmisogyny,” to name a few. The history of gender scholarship included transgender studies, and the overview of gender assumptions and approaches to the study of gender were presented from a transgender perspective. During discussions of theory, I posed the following questions: “How does this theory apply to transmen, transwomen, or a genderqueer individual?” or “How does this theory contribute to or challenge cisnormativity?”

The “Gender, Communication and Society” language unit included a reading focused on how transgender terminology has changed over time, pronouns usage, and a brief overview of queer linguistics (Adams). One class activity reviewed and critiqued GLAAD’s media guidelines for how to write about transgender citizens. In the unit on nonverbal communication, students read a study of Joshua Riverdale’s online visual documentation of his physical transformation (Barnett). A class activity

afforded students an opportunity to review and critique photojournalistic coverage of Caitlin Jenner, Thomas Beatie, and Chelsea Manning and the art photography of Leland Bobbe. The organizational communication unit featured two student group presentations on the role communication plays in organizational assimilation and harassment of transgender employees in the workplace and on bullying of transgender students in school. Students read Capuzza and Ekstrand’s “Transgender Workplace Rights” and sections of *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Grant et al.). The interpersonal unit included a student group presentation on transgender communication within the family. Students read an article about families’ experiences when their loved ones come out as transgender (Norwood and Lannutti). The intercultural unit included a class activity that showcased YouTube videos about transgender discrimination in Brazil, South Africa, and Malaysia.

In the media course, the representations unit focused on the following questions: “How are gender identities constructed in this message (cisgender, transgender, genderqueer)?”; “How do media play a part in how gender assumptions are reaffirmed or challenged in this message?”; and “Why is media visibility important to minority groups (including the transgender community)?” One of the student group projects focused on transgender representation in film, and students completed a content analysis class project about news coverage of either transgender people or representations in transgender children’s literature. For the unit on media effects, students read Kermode and Trans Media Watch’s “How Trans People Experience the Media.” The final unit included brief student presentations on transgender alternative media and watchdog groups such as GLAAD and Trans Media Watch.

In addition to updating and revising the content of the course, my pedagogical practices changed so as to create a trans friendly classroom. Obviously, I no longer assume all my students are cisgender. When I review the roster on the first day of class, I ask students to tell me their names and pronouns. I started each day off with five minutes set aside for “class business” in which students share news stories or observations made since the last class regarding gender. I was heartened that much of the information students offered up related to transgender identity.

At the end of the semester, I explained to students how I revised the course and why, and I asked for their reflections. Students appreciated the open and nonjudgmental space for inquiry and the consistent effort to invite transgender voices into the classroom with readings written by transgender people and video testimonials. As for my own reflections, I believe the course succeeded in that transgender material was integrated throughout the course consistently and that I avoided presenting a one-size-fits-all

transgender identity. I felt surprised that I encountered very little student resistance and how many cisgender students weaved in personal narratives of experiences with transgender people into the class with a tone of genuine support. The next time I teach these courses, I will strive to focus on intersectionality more deeply and to spend more time interrogating cisgender privilege more directly. I look forward to adopting a trans-centric perspective in a course that does not explicitly focus on gender in the future.

Conclusions

This chapter's narratives collectively offer a variety of perspectives about transing communication education, particularly within gender communication classes, but also in media, interpersonal, and intercultural classes, and with observations that will cross apply to other types of courses in communication curricula as well. We invite colleagues to continue this dialogue and to innovate additional transgender pedagogies. Working together, we can build a bridge between critical communication pedagogies and transgender studies.

To pull some threads through the narratives, we point out here several areas of overlap and commonality in our experiences, including places where our experiences diverge. Some of our narratives draw more heavily on theory and performative writing, and other narratives focus explicitly on concrete lesson plans to trans communication classrooms. Some of our narratives focus on transgender issues and current events from a communication perspective. Whether primarily theoretical or applied, our narratives have in common a commitment to disrupting hegemonic cisnormativity in communication pedagogy and to equipping students with the tools they need to challenge transgender discrimination within higher education and beyond.

In living out that commitment, we confront various challenges and paradoxes, related to our own identities and the degree to which they ought to feature in class discussions and decisions about when we "intervene" as students struggle through concepts of privilege, power, and difference. Institutional status introduces some paradox, too, for graduate students and contingent faculty who experience constraints in their ability to shape class content as they might fully desire. On the other hand, a dean has more visibility, which comes with its own limitations.

Despite these challenges, we experienced many profound successes in transing our communication classrooms, from observing changes in colleagues' and students' approaches to topics even ostensibly unrelated to gender identity, to observing that midway into a term, students bring up gender identity on their own before the instructor even prompts it. Several of us found ourselves pleasantly surprised at students' receptiveness to thinking critically about gender identity, even while we acknowledge the occasionally nasty anonymous course evaluation.

As we extend the invitation to our readers to trans their own communication classrooms, we offer four overall suggestions that build on the future directions mentioned in the narratives above. Each of these contributes to this book's overall emphasis on the praxis of queer communication pedagogy, again filtered through our lens of a particular emphasis on gender identity. First, continually think about gender identity intersectionally. As some of these narratives point out explicitly and others imply, people do not experience their gender identity neutrally or equally, and we always experience our gender identity simultaneously with an experience of race, class, nationality, sexuality, education level, religious identity, and a number of other axes of difference; moreover, intersectional analysis considers these identities not just as social locations, but as sites for the operation of power, privilege, and oppression. Second, resist the temptation to reduce transgender identity to a binary or construct monolithic narratives of trans experience. Genderqueer, non-binary, gender fluid, and agender perspectives often remain invisible even in research and teaching ostensibly aware of gender identity. Third, allow the process of transing to invite cisgender students and faculty to interrogate the role of cisnormativity and cisgender privilege in their lives. Rather than treating transgender identities as other and everyone else as "normal," a trans-centric approach makes cisgender identity more visible. Fourth, while many of our reflections come from gender communication courses, we illustrate as well that transing the communication classroom works in a variety of courses, not only those about gender. We encourage communication instructors to think about the ways cisnormativity implicitly structures examples, readings, and activities—and more important, ways to trans those classes productively, fully recognizing that these choices have serious implications within our classrooms.

Notes

- 1 In this collaboratively authored chapter, each writer uses their own preferred language in their respective narratives. In introducing, framing, and concluding the essay, we use the terms "transgender" and "trans" interchangeably as umbrella terms to capture a range of gender identities that involve some movement from the sex designated at birth. For comprehensive definitions of these and related terms, see Stryker; Spencer ("Introduction"); and the entire first two issues of the academic journal *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*.
- 2 Throughout the essay (especially the literature review), we often cite representative examples of research in cognate fields to communication (such as higher education, social work, psychology, English, and others), but the citations included here are far from a comprehensive list. To save space, we cut a number of citations, but readers interested in a more exhaustive bibliography can view a supplemental file of suggested further readings at the following URL: <http://tinyurl.com/further-reading-trans>.

3 The asterisk denotes individuals who identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender nonconforming—arguably a more inclusive notation than using “transgender” across the board.

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