

# It's a mistake to make students reveal their pronouns

BY JOSHUA PEDERSON

**T**ed Cruz, who holds degrees from Princeton and Harvard, appears not to know what a pronoun is. The senator from Texas was speaking at a conservative rally in late July when he weighed in on the question of gender identification in the university classroom.

"I talked to a student recently at one of our woke college campuses who said she is required in every class to introduce herself and to give her pronouns," he said, adding, "Well, I'm Ted Cruz, and my pronoun is 'kiss my ass.'"

The friendly crowd erupted in glee.

So proud was Cruz of his punchline that he posted it immediately to Twitter, where it began racking up conservative likes and progressive outrage.

But here's the thing: Cruz is right, though not for the reasons he thinks he is. University professors shouldn't require students to share their pronouns on the first day of class. But they should ask. I've come to learn over the years that the distinction is important.

I first began thinking about the question of pronouns in the classroom a few years before the pandemic ground in-per-

son education to a halt. I'm a professor, but I'm also a straight-white-cis-male-able-bodied bucket of privilege. Many of my students aren't, and I strive to make my classroom as inclusive as possible. I thought I was doing just that the first time I told students at the beginning of the semester to introduce themselves by their chosen names and then to share their pronouns.

The exercise seemed to have gone off without a hitch. By the last discussion of the day, I was feeling pretty good about myself, resting comfortably on my progressive laurels.

But as my students began filing out of the classroom, one lagged behind, visibly distraught. They asked if they could talk to me about the way I ran introductions. They identified as non-binary and used they/them pronouns, but they felt exposed and vulnerable when I told them to share that. I didn't make them feel included; I made them feel unsafe.

I was chastened and humbled and sorry, and I said so. I was also educated, and I've taken a new tack since then.

In the years since, I've come to learn that it is a valuable thing to give my pro-



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nouns and to invite students to give theirs while not requiring that they do so.

Apart from making some feel unsafe, mandating that students share pronouns can force those who are unsure of their gender identity to pick one, even if they don't feel ready. It can alienate students for whom such discussions remain foreign. To be educated requires openness. It seldom begins with being put on the spot.

Making pronoun disclosure optional

creates space for students to have their identities affirmed. It helps normalize non-cis orientations. And it can set the table for more nuanced discussions of gender, sex, and power inside the classroom and beyond it.

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