



Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment for LGBTQIAA+ Individuals

Educational White Paper

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Abstract

This educational white paper will cover the following topics: LGBTQIAA+ key terms, gender nonconforming brief history, and gender nonconforming issues in online education contributing to attrition rates. The purpose of this educational white paper, with practice materials, is to serve as an educational foundation in present matters facing gender nonconforming LGBTQIAA+ folks and online students. This educational white paper will present best practices for creating an inclusive and encouraging e-learning environment to increase a sense of belonging and inclusivity in this community. Lastly, this educational white paper reviews some flags that are used to represent critical members of the community.

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Introduction

This educational white paper provides a comprehensive exploration of the LGBTQIAA+ community from understanding the abbreviation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally, and + (LGBTQIAA+) to a brief history of the LGBTQ+ community and the ever-evolving Pride flag that represents the community at large.

Starting with basic terminology definitions, tracing its roots from ancient indigenous cultures to contemporary society, and untwisting the blurred lines between sexuality and gender identity with the help of the *Gender Bear*. Key historical events, milestones, and cultural shifts will be articulated. Highlights of the struggles, triumphs, and contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals will be elevated, and a focus will be on their continuous fight for equality and recognition in academic spaces.

By examining many topics in the community, this educational white paper illuminates the expansive tapestry of LGBTQ+ history, inspiring understanding, acceptance, and solidarity. It is important to understand two concepts: 1. The LGBTQ+ community is not monolithic; everyone has their own lived experiences and identities; 2. The community (identified by the abbreviation) is a joint community based on gender identities and sexuality. Lean into the teachings of *The Gender Bear* (below) to understand the nuances between the two identities.

1. The LGBTQ+ community is not monolithic; everyone has their own lived experiences and identities.

2. The community (identified by the abbreviation) is a joint community based on gender identities and sexuality.

LGBTQIAA+ Abbreviations: Definitions and Key Terms

Lesbian

Lesbian refers to individuals who identify as women who are attracted emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually to others who identify as women (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

Gay

Gay typically refers to individuals who identify as men who are attracted emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually to others who identify as men. “Gay” can be used as an umbrella term to describe individuals of any gender who are attracted to the same gender (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

Bisexual

Bisexual refers to individuals who are attracted emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually to those who identify as either men and/or women. Bisexuality acknowledges attraction to more than one gender but is used in the context of the binary gender system (male and female). In contrast, pansexual is a term that

moves beyond the binary gender system and is used to describe a sexuality where individuals can be attracted emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually to other individuals regardless of the other person’s gender identity or lack thereof (gender nonconforming) (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

Transgender Individuals

Transgender individuals describe individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender individuals may identify as male, female, or have a gender identity that is nonconforming or outside of the binary system (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

Intersex

Intersex is a term that describes individuals who typically have genitals that do not fit the definition of the binary sex definitions of “male” and “female.” Intersex individuals may have chromosomal variations. Intersex

is a sex marker based on biological characteristics. Therefore, intersex is not a gender identity because a person decides their gender identity in their brain regardless of their sex assigned at birth (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

Asexual

Asexual is a sexuality. Asexual is a term to describe individuals who are attracted emotionally, romantically, but have a very low to non-existent sexual interest towards others. Understanding the nuances between “asexual” and “celibacy.” Celibacy can be defined as an individual who chooses to refrain from acting upon feelings of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction due to their religion, cultural practices, or personal reasons. People are not born celibate, but people are born asexual. Celibacy is a choice, asexuality is not (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

Ally

An ally (in the context of LGBTQ+ aspects) can be defined as a straight cis-gender person who supports the community and stands up against hatred (homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia), inequality, inequity, and exclusion in education, politics, social systems, and society at large (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

In academic writing, it is acceptable to shorten the abbreviation to LGBTQ+; however, a best practice is to use the full abbreviation first and then explain that the abbreviation will be shortened for writing purposes. Always add the “+” at the end of the abbreviation to be more inclusive of all identities of the individuals who belong to the community.

The Plus “+”

The “+” symbolizes recognizing and including additional gender identities and sexualities. These gender identities and sexualities are beyond the representation of those identities in the abbreviation. The plus symbol acknowledges the diversity and fluidity of identities within the community (Walker-Roberts, 2023).

A best practice is always using the plus symbol in written and verbal works for a more inclusive sentiment to the queer community. Many individuals in the community recognize that the abbreviation can be difficult to memorize, so using the plus at the end helps community members feel more included, even when they struggle to express it verbally.

Examples of the Plus “+”

“Mahu” is a term used in traditional Native Hawaiian culture to describe individuals who express both masculine and feminine qualities or have a non-binary or gender-diverse identity.

In Native Hawaiian culture, mahu individuals are recognized and respected for their unique roles and contributions within the community. They often possess knowledge and skills associated with men and women and may have specific cultural roles such as caretakers, healers, or performers. Historically, mahu individuals played significant roles in religious ceremonies and cultural practices.

“Two-Spirit” is a term used by some Indigenous peoples of North America to describe individuals who embody both masculine and feminine qualities or have a spiritual and cultural understanding of gender that is beyond the gender binary system.

In Indigenous cultures, Two-Spirit individuals hold a respected and revered place within their communities. They hold roles and responsibilities, such as healers, visionaries, artists, or ceremonial leaders. Two-Spirit individuals can identify with one or many of the gender identities and sexualities within the LGBTQ+ abbreviation.

Brief

LGBTQIAA+ History

As you can imagine, the LGBTQ+ community has a long history of acceptance and rejection. Native cultures worldwide accepted individuals who expressed gender and sexual orientation beyond the two binary systems mainstream society uses today. The binary language was unknown to these cultures. Two native societies worth noting to demonstrate this fact are the Native American and Native Hawaiian cultures.

The Native American culture, specifically the Dine tribe, used “nadle” and “berdache” to describe individuals who were attracted emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually to other individuals who identify as the same gender. Additionally, they had four gender expressions in their societies compared to the two gender expressions imposed upon our society today. These individuals were accepted and survived comfortably; they thrived in the culture. Similarly, the Native Hawaiian culture held a respectable space for individuals who identified outside of what we know today as the binary systems: gender and homosexuality. The term that Native Hawaiians used to describe individuals who engaged in same-gender love or expressed both feminine and masculine traits: “mahu.” Like the Native Americans, the Native

Hawaiians held sacred roles, such as medical people, shamans, elderly care providers, and youth care providers. European colonization changed the peaceful and accepting nature of both native societies. They hastily and forcefully imposed the gender binary system and banned same-gender love, rooted in a religious context, on native societies and European white succeeding generations. Societal acceptance quickly became societal rejection through brutal behaviors, even death, imposed upon individuals who did not conform to the gender binary system and romantic opposite-gender love (straight sexual orientation).

Queer people in what is now known as the United States of America were forced into “the closet” to survive in a society that elevated, taught, and celebrated heteronormative ideology, leaving no room for queer love and expression. This behavior went on for decades; there were even many laws crafted by the government to make being queer illegal. As one can imagine, the progression from acceptance to rejection and forced assimilation oppressed many people for decades. Over many decades, the oppression of queer existence reached a boiling point in June 1969 when the New York

City police department raided the popular Queer club “The Stonewall Inn.” On June 28, after years and decades of harassment, Marsha P. Johnson, a transgender woman of color, threw a shot glass at the mirror behind the bar. The patrons thought the loud “bang” was a gunshot and, with much adrenaline, literally rose against the oppressing police department and resisted their oppressive behavior: constant harassment, unjust arrest, and physical brutality. The uprising was the spark to the “Gay Liberation Movement,” where queer activism was born. The movement challenges all of the social systems in America: political, policing, medical, education, military, etc. After sixty years of queer uprising, the American society has seen significant progress. For example, queer people earned equality in the political system by removing the “Defensive of Marriage Act” (DOMA) on June 26, 2013. Moreover, queer people earned equality in the military system when “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) was repealed, and queer people could serve in the military without being fired for being queer.

However, there is a great need for more activism and acceptance of queer people in the public education system in America. American society has made better strides on sexuality or sexual orientation topics versus gender identity topics. Many anti-transgender/gender-nonconforming bills have been signed into law in the last few years. A huge spotlight has been put on gender identity versus sexual orientation over the last few years. Gender identities and sexualities have been twisted together into one

big, inclusive community represented by the LGBTQIAA+ abbreviation. Due to the big twist of gender identity and sexuality, confusion is possible, and it is important to untwist the communities for clarity.

Gender Identity vs. Sexuality with the *Gender Bear*

Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different identities that are exclusive of one another. The *Gender Bear* (figure 1 below) is a great visual to help distinguish between gender identity, sexual orientation, and how one chooses to express themselves. There are four categories to understand when unpacking the nuances between the identities and expression: 1. gender identity; 2. gender expression; 3. sex assigned at birth; and 4. physical and emotional attraction. A symbol on the *Gender Bear* represents each of these categories.

A rainbow on the *Gender Bear* represents gender identity. It is essential to recognize that gender identity happens in one's brain/mind. Individuals determine their gender identity by how they perceive themselves. Every person is entitled to define what their gender identity is, whether it is within the binary (female, male, woman, man, girl, or boy) or beyond the binary (non-binary, genderfluid, genderqueer, etc.). The critical aspect to remember is that gender identity should not be linked to gender expression. The simplest way to determine an individual is to ask them what are their gender pronouns. Do not ever assume an individual's gender based on their gender expression.

Gender expression is represented by the little dashes that form an arc on the left side of the *Gender Bear*. Expressions can emerge in many ways: hairstyles, wardrobe ensembles, fingernails, clothing, behaviors, mannerisms, tone of voice, etc. Every individual is free to choose how they want to express themselves, and there is no room to assume an individual's correct gender by the way they express themselves. It is imperative to simply ask the individual how they identify regardless of expression. Some expressions can be assigned by society as feminine, masculine, gender nonconforming, and/or gender fluid; however, you still want to ask individuals how they identify so you do not incorrectly address them.

Sex assigned at birth is represented by the DNA helix between the *Gender Bear's* legs. There are two sex markers assigned at birth: female or male. These sex markers are based on what genitalia is between one's legs (like gender bear) and biological characteristics such as chromosomal patterns. Intersex individuals belong in the "sex marker" category as well, even though, in most cases, medical doctors augment the individual's body to fit them in either the "female" or "male" sex marker on the birth certificate.

Lastly, physical and emotional attraction (in a romantic way) one has for another individual is represented by *Gender Bear's* heart—a perfect representation of an individual's sexual-

ity. Many of the physical and emotional attractions, in a romantic way, have been presented in the key terms and definitions section.

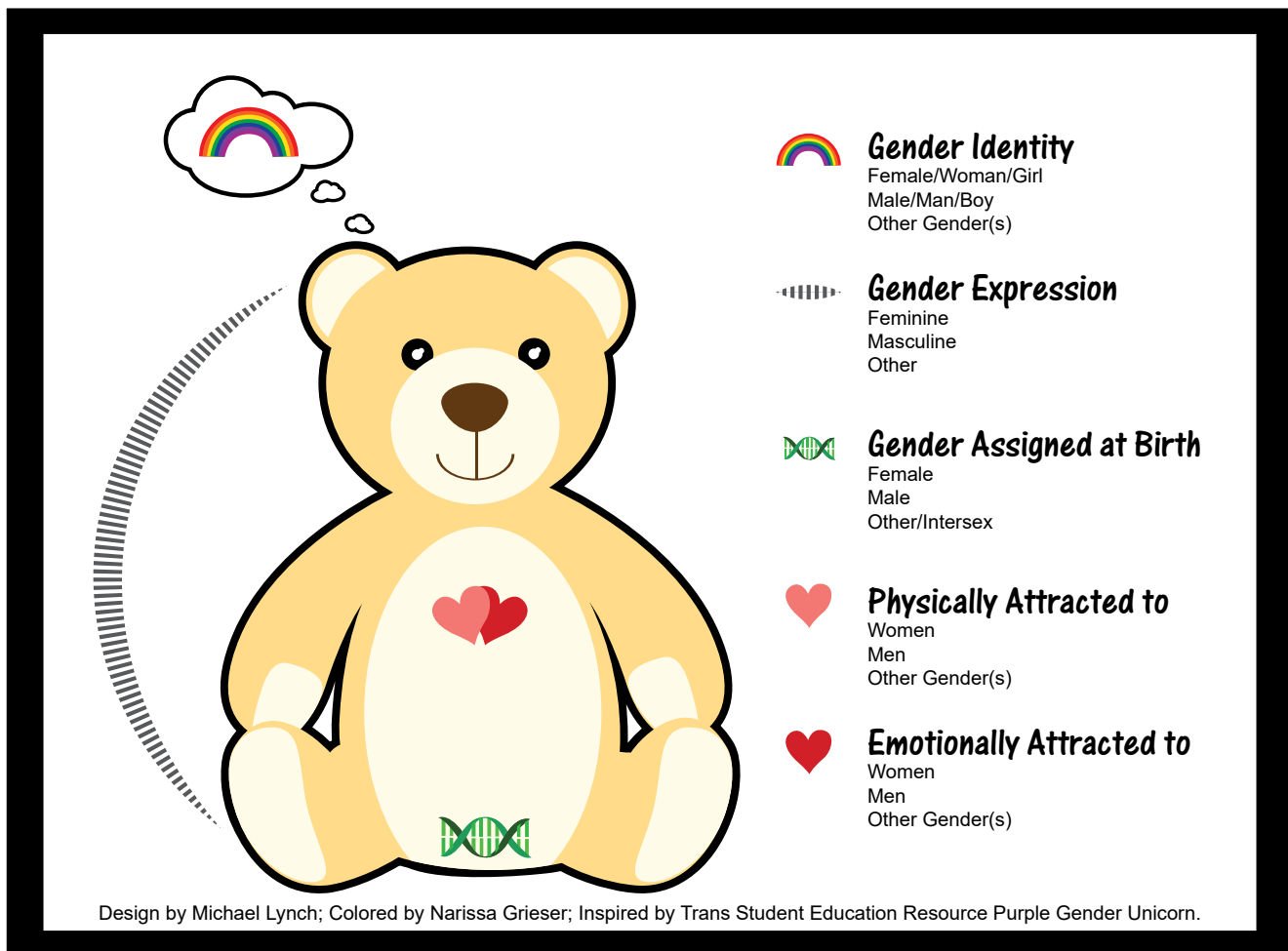


Figure 1. The Gender Bear (they/them) (Walker-Roberts, 2023)

Challenges and Struggles in Academia

Many American students, online or in the classroom, are demanding equity in their learning experience, especially from a gender identity standpoint. One way for all to improve on being more inclusive in education and beyond is to speak and write in gender-neutral terms until unless the individual has shared their gender pronouns with you. Gender pronouns are words we use in place of names. The gender binary pronouns are widely known. If a person identifies as female, the correct pronouns are she/her/hers. If a person identifies as male, the correct pronouns are he/him/his. If a person identifies as gender nonconforming, they may use they/them/theirs, ze/hir/hirs, or xe/xem/xyrs, to name a few. There are many, many correct pronouns. The best practice to ensure you are using the correct one for an individual is to ask, “What are your correct pronouns?”

Additionally, you can use the person’s name or gender-nonconforming pronouns (they/them/theirs) until otherwise told what the individual’s correct pronouns are. Be cognizant of correct pronouns being displayed on Zoom squares and electronic male signatures. One way to maintain inclusivity is using gender-nonconforming language in everyday con-

versations. The act of intentionally swapping one word for another is circumlocution. Simply circumlocution techniques can help spaces be more gender inclusive for all.

Practice Circumlocution



Circumlocution is speaking and writing with intentionality. More people will feel included in the communication when you speak and write with better intentions. The American Psychological Association 7th Edition demands that authors use gender-nonconforming language in their scholarly writing to ensure inclusivity. Communicating, whether written or verbal, in a gender-nonconforming way takes practice, and just like learning a language, a scaffolding approach is needed. The first step is swapping the vocabulary word in the known language to practice writing or saying the vocabulary word in the new language. Then, the word will automatically flow when conversing in the learned language. Let us practice circumlocution with gender-nonconforming vocabulary words while enacting a growth mindset.

Practice

Circumlocution

Growth Mindset in Action

Inclusive Language Exercise

Gender Binary (Fixed Mindset)	Gender Neutral (Growth Mindset)
Boys and Girls (Classroom)	
Military Men and Women	
Guys (addressing a group)	
Ladies and Gentlemen	
Girlfriend/Boyfriend	
Husband/Wife	
He/Him/His	
She/Her/Hers	
Aunt/Uncle	

Figure 2. Circumlocution practice: fill in the blank with gender-neutral words or phrases (Walker-Roberts, 2023)

How did you do? Check your answers with the answer key in Figure 3.

Growth Mindset in Action

Inclusive Language Exercise


 Gender Binary (Fixed Mindset)	 Gender Neutral (Growth Mindset)
Boys and Girls (Classroom)	Students
Military Men and Women	Distinguished Military Personnel
Guys (addressing a group)	Folks
Ladies and Gentlemen	Everyone, You All, Y'all
Girlfriend/Boyfriend	Partner
Husband/Wife	Spouse
He/Him/His	They/Them/Theirs
She/Her/Hers	They/Them/Theirs
Aunt/Uncle	Pibling

Figure 3. Answer key. How did you do? Keep up the great work! (Walker-Roberts, 2023)

Great job. Practicing to make your communication (written and spoken) more inclusive using gender-nonconforming language. Inclusivity makes more people feel a sense of belonging and affirms everyone’s existence. Another way the LGBTQ+ community has bolstered a sense of community, belonging and inclusion is by using two symbols. The first symbol is the all-inclusive rainbow symbol. The rainbow symbol became iconic after Gilbert Baker designed and created the rainbow flag in 1978 in San Francisco. The flag earned global recognition to

unite the community and its allies and is still a prominent symbol today. Over the years, the flag has evolved, and there are well over 50+ flags that queer communities use to show pride and visibility. Every flag is important and worthy of review, but from a macro level, six flags have been chosen to present in this paper.

LGBTQIAA+ Pride Flags

As stated, there are over 50+ flags that represent the members that belong to the LGBTQ+ community. The flags are significant symbols to represent visibility, pride, advocacy, and inclusion. When a queer person sees one of these symbols displayed, they feel a sense of community and acceptance. The universal LGBTQ+ flag representing the community has evolved over the years from simple rainbow. Here are six flags:



This is the first and original Pride Flag.

Gilbert Baker created this rainbow flag to unite the LGBTQIAA+ community. California's first openly gay elected official, Harvey Milk, asked Baker to create a unifying symbol. Harvey Milk was elected as a San Francisco City Supervisor. The rainbow flag was proudly showcased in San Francisco on June 25, 1978, at the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade. The unifying symbol was embraced not only in America but worldwide, and the rainbow flag is one of the most recognizable symbols representing a minority community that has been oppressed for decades. The rainbow flag represents visibility, pride, strength, love, and unity! The rainbow flag has evolved over the years to be more inclusive and to help elevate some of the most underrepresented communities: the Transgender community, People of Color communities, and the Intersex community.



This Pride Flag represents the Transgender communities. Monica Helms created the Transgender Pride Flag to represent the transgender community in 1999. The other representational flags inspired Helms to create a flag for the community in which she belongs to, so she unveiled a flag representing transgender individuals. Helms wanted a specific flag to unite, represent visibility, pride, strength, love, and unity within the particular community and at large.



2018 Inclusive and progressive Pride Flag. Daniel Quasar designed an inclusive Pride Flag that included colors from both the Transgender Community Pride Flag (pastel pink and blue colors) and the Community of Color Pride Flag (black and brown colors). However, Valentino Vecchietti, took another step toward inclusion, in 2021, by adding a part of the Intersex Pride Flag (the purple circle on a yellow backdrop) to the existing colors.



This is the More Colors More Pride Flag. The Philadelphia Office of LGBTQ+ Affairs leader Amber Hikes, introduced this Pride Flag in June 2017 (LGBTQ+ Pride Month) to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people of color. Two new colors were introduced to the original Pride rainbow flag: black and brown. The black and brown colors are intended to elevate the visibility, pride, strength, love, and unity of individuals within communities of color.



This is the Ally Pride Flag. This pride flag represents the cisgender, straight people who support, love, stand in solidarity with, advocate for, and purposefully create safe places for LGBTQIAA+ individuals. The Ally Pride Flag has not been updated yet to the 2021 most inclusive and progressive Pride Flag. It is also important to recognize the double “As” in the abbreviation LGBTQI “AA” +. The first “A” represents the Asexual community, and the second “A” represents the Ally community. Using two “As” in the abbreviation is very important to give visibility and recognition to the Asexual community.



2021 Most inclusive and progressive LGBTQIAA+ Pride Flag. Adding the purple circle on a yellow backdrop to the existing 2018 flag was done by Valentino Vecchietti. Vecchietti designed the new flag with intersex inclusion at the top of mind. All of the Pride Flags are important from a historical context; however, it is vital that when displaying a Pride Flag, the most inclusive and progressive 2021 Pride Flag is chosen to represent the LGBTQIAA+ community.

Conclusion

This educational white paper provided a comprehensive exploration of the LGBTQIAA+ community from understanding the abbreviation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/ Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally, and + (LGBTQIAA+) to a brief history of the LGBTQ+ community and the ever-evolving Pride flag that represents the community at large.

A comprehensive list of basic LGBTQ+ terms and concepts were definitions. LGBTQ+ historical roots were traced back to ancient indigenous cultures. It is essential to understand the nuances between gender identities and sexualities. A brief history of events and milestones was discussed. The Gender Bear is a great visual to help unwind the big twist of gender identities and sexualities, which all thrive under the large LGBTQIAA+ umbrella.

Lastly, a limited but powerful amount of Pride Flags was presented. Pride flags help unite, advocate, represent, and build pride in a minority community that still faces atrocities in American society and around the world. Knowledge is power, and this paper aims to pass on LGBTQIAA+ knowledge to create more inclusive environments for LGBTQIAA+ individuals.

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Author's Biography



Gary Simeon Walker-Roberts, Ph.D. (they/them/theirs), is a proud LGBTQIAA+ scholar who began their educational journey at the local community college in California. After earning an Associates of Arts in Arts and Humanities at Los Medanos College, Dr. Gary earned a Bachelor of Arts in Ethnic Studies, Gender and Sexualities at California State University, East Bay (CSUEB). Thereafter, they earned a Master of Arts in English at Arizona State University and obtained a Doctor of Philosophy in Education with a specialization in E-Learning at legacy Northcentral University, now known as National University (NU). Dr. Gary is a Professor in the Global Innovation, Social Emotional Learning, and Education Technology (GSET)

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Dr. Gary is a proud member of National University System's Social Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (S-JEDI) Council where they champion the Inclusive Excellence Framework with a focus on LGBTQIAA+ inclusion and equity at NU. Lastly, Dr. Gary is a prestigious 2023 Award-winning National University Faculty Member: Jerry C. Lee Presidential Award.