

Ask Matt: Some Tips for Presenting on Trans Issues

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Abstract

A reader writes: "I'm thinking about speaking to a Gender Studies class at the college I attend because of some ignorant comments from ignorant classmates when I took the class last semester (such as 'I can pick out trans people by looking into their eyes'). "The professor thinks that it's a great idea. (I spent [...]*

Article

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"I'm thinking about speaking to a Gender Studies class at the college I attend because of some ignorant comments from ignorant classmates when I took the class last semester (such as 'I can pick out trans people by looking into their eyes').*

"The professor thinks that it's a great idea. (I spent the whole semester educating him.)

"I am not actively out at the school and would use a pseudonym if I do a presentation. The college has a very large student population of 40,000+, so I'm not too concerned about being known, but don't want to be stupid.

"Besides using a pseudonym and making sure everyone has their phone and computers put away, are there any tips that you can give me before I commit to do this - like what to say, etc.?"

This is a good question that I think a lot of people wonder about, particularly if you are not a speaker or teacher. Whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, we as trans people are often put into the position of either wanting to or having to educate, and sometimes we are asked to do this in front of a class or group, even if we are not professional presenters.

Unfortunately, when we do speak, we are often seen as representatives of our entire group, providing information that transfers to anyone who identifies as trans in some way. Whatever we put out there is seen as fact, and how we present ourselves in front of others is seen as the way "trans people are."

Because of these misunderstandings, and because speaking in front of a group is just plain tough, especially if you're not used to it, there are a few tips that I can offer that might be helpful. Readers will probably have others. Here are some that I consider essential:

1. Overview: Start out with a brief introduction, including who you are (even if you are using a pseudonym), how you identify (tell them that definitions will come later), and why you are there. Explain (briefly) what you intend to talk about during the class period. Explain to them why this information is

necessary and important for them as students and as human beings functioning in a very diverse world.

Let them know when they can ask questions (during the presentation, afterward, or both). Let them know ahead of time if there are any questions you will not answer or any topics you will not address. Don't say "Ask me anything" unless you mean it. If you plan to talk about your own experiences, let them know that these are yours alone and do not necessarily reflect the experiences of other trans-identified people.

2. Define Your Terms: It's important to define any terms you will be using right at the beginning. You can repeat these definitions later, but start out with the most important terms - the ones they will hear throughout the presentation. And remember to let them know that these definitions can vary from region to region, group to group, or even person to person. Let them know that the definitions they will hear are yours and that there are others.

For example, I have a very narrow definition of "transgender" that is not the most popular one out there. I give them that definition, and then I tell them that there is a broader definition, and I give them that one, too. Then I explain that there are others, and that language is changing and evolving all the time, so they should not think that any of the definitions I give them are the final word. They are a start, and they help to form a foundation on which the audience can build additional knowledge as they get it.

3. Main Topic(s): You have to decide what you want to talk about, based on the time allotted and your general purpose. There is so much information to impart that you will only be able to touch on the most important topics, and those topics are the ones that are most important to you. An hour will go by very quickly, and you want to leave time for questions at the end, as well as being able to answer questions as they come up, if you plan to do this.

I am teaching a Transgender Studies class at Metro State University this semester. It is a three-credit class that meets for almost three hours once a week for fifteen weeks. It's packed full of stuff and I still don't have enough time. So you really have to narrow your focus and decide on the essentials, whatever those are for you.

For me, the most essential stuff for a short presentation is definitions (see number 2), what these definitions really mean in real-life situations for real live people, the concept of choice (which encompasses "cause" theories and why I think they don't matter, but why some other people do), discrimination and its damaging results, etiquette, and being an ally. I also try to work sexual orientation versus gender identity in there, which usually comes in during definitions, but if I have time, I expand upon it.

It is very helpful if you can include some examples from your own life to illustrate some of your points. Audiences love personal examples and stories. They also love humor. The more humor you can infuse into your presentation without dismissing the seriousness of the topic, the better your audience response will be.

4. Questions: Don't underestimate how much time you will need for this. Allow at least twenty minutes if you can, and honestly, that won't be enough. Depending on the time you are given, you should devote a third of it to Q&A at the very minimum, if possible.

Before you take questions, you can remind them of any questions you won't answer or topics you won't address. This is important, because it's awful for the asker if they ask you something and you say, "I'm not going to answer that." This can embarrass the asker and make other people afraid to ask questions. If they already know that there are topics to avoid, they won't ask those questions.

Also, handouts are very helpful and can cover information that you don't have time to present. If you get handouts to the instructor ahead of time, he or she can make copies for the class. A Definitions handout is good (you can use myTranslations or make your own). You are also welcome to copy and paste myTrans Etiquette information and my Ten Things Not to Say to a Trans Person(which is a little snarky, but it is the most popular page on my blog and can add some humor at the same time that it is imparting information).

The only thing I ask is that, if you use anything from my site (my stuff is copyrighted), you credit me and give them the URL to my site. But you can also make up your own handouts that go specifically with your presentation. People love handouts, and they help the audience remember what was discussed.

Whatever you decide to do and whatever you decide to talk about, remember that this is a very controversial topic still. Sometimes I feel as if I live in a "trans bubble," because when I do a presentation, it often surprises me how little people actually know about this topic and how uncomfortable or afraid it makes some people. So the most important thing you can do is make your audience relaxed and comfortable.

Humor does this. Honesty does this. Admitting that you are human and that you don't know everything does this. Letting them know that you understand that they might be uncomfortable with the topic does this. And letting them know that you are not there to change their mind or their beliefs - you are only there to give them information - does this.

It's even okay to let them know that you are nervous (if you are) and that you have not done this before, but that you think it's so important that you are here to do it now. It is important. And you will feel very good once you have done it, and your campus and the world will be a better place because of it.

Good luck to you and to anyone else out there who is just starting out on the presentation path. I know a lot of readers also do presentations, so there will no doubt some good advice will show up in the Comments section.

Readers?

(Ask Matt questions are backing up again. Please bear with me and know that I will get to them and respond. I try to take them in the order in which they are received. Thanks so much for your patience and for reading!)

Cross-posted from Tranifesto

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