



Creating trans-inclusive libraries: the UX perspective (UXLibsIV plenary)

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As someone interested in inclusive UX, you will no doubt have encountered an increasing amount of legal regulation and policy guidance concerning trans inclusion. As a freelance trans awareness trainer – and as a trans person who happens to be a pretty avid user of libraries – I’m here to tell you that policies are great, but they can’t ever be treated as the end point. While it’s essential that everyone is aware of their legal responsibilities and their organisation’s policy, that in itself won’t create a trans-inclusive library. What makes the biggest difference is the *interpersonal* dimension of library use: the interactions trans library users have with staff. That might be direct, in-person contact on a library helpdesk, or it might be the consequences of a decision made by a member of staff which reaches a user hours, days, weeks or months later: a subject heading on a catalogue, a note on a library record, or a sign on a toilet door. All of these interactions make up the trans user experience. Considering trans inclusion from a UX perspective is crucial, and I was very excited to be invited to do just that at UXLibsIV.

Because levels of knowledge about trans issues vary so widely, it’s important that I begin with a ‘Trans 101’. Some of you will be familiar with this information already, and that’s great – but I want to make sure nobody’s left behind. Trans-inclusive practices need a strong foundation of basic familiarity on which to rest. This can only ever be the basics – there are lots of resources out there that go into the concepts more deeply – but hopefully it provides a useful background to the more library-specific content I discuss later on.

Trans 101

Sex and gender

To start with, we need to talk about sex and gender. Often, in Western European

society, we use the words 'sex' and 'gender' relatively interchangeably. But in fact, one of the key building blocks for understanding trans identities is the fact that sex and gender are *not* the same thing. This is how the World Health Organisation defines them:

Sex refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc.

Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.

So sex, broadly, is something biological and physiological; gender is something socially constructed. (If you're thinking, 'That sounds a bit simplistic,' you would be right – but stay with me for now!) In simple terms, then, one way to think about trans identities is that not everybody's gender matches up perfectly with their sex.

When babies are born, doctors will assign them a gender based on what they perceive their sex to be. You might have heard trans people using precisely this wording: talking about having been 'assigned male at birth' or 'assigned female at birth'. Typically, we will say this instead of saying that we were 'born male' or 'born female'. If you're not familiar with the phraseology of 'assigned genders', now is the time to get your head round it: it's a really important linguistic strategy for talking about trans people in a respectful way. By using these words, we validate the fact that a lot of trans people don't feel they were *born* one gender, then *became* the other. Take me, for example: I don't feel like I was 'born female' and then somehow metamorphosed into a man at the age of 24. Rather, I feel like I was born male, but I was incorrectly assigned a female gender on the basis of my sex.

The 'gender binary'

Of course, in the UK at present, there are only two options for what gender you might be assigned at birth. This is where the term 'binary gender' comes from. In Western culture, we're generally brought up to believe that there are only two options for gender, and everybody must be one or the other. In other words, the narrative goes, gender is like binary code in computing: everything is either a zero or a one. If you're not male, you must be female.

In fact, though, this binary idea doesn't match up with how a lot of people experience their gender. If we were to sketch out a more accurate way of depicting gender, we might end up with something more like this:

The Gender Elephant

THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR
GENDER+SEXUAL
DIVERSITY



LE CENTRE CANADIEN DE LA
DIVERSITÉ DES GENRES
+ DE LA SEXUALITÉ

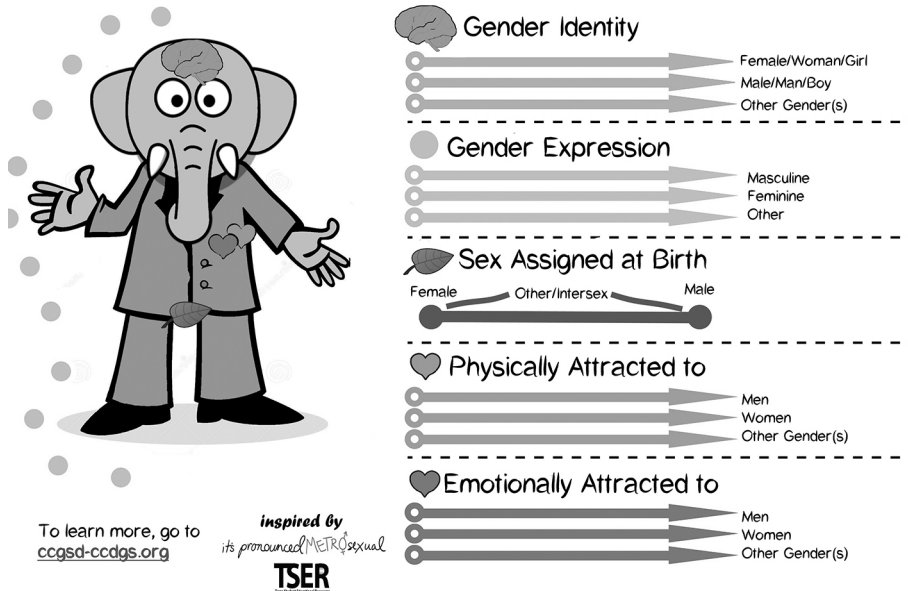


Figure 1 The Gender Elephant: created by The Canadian Centre for Gender & Sexual Diversity and reproduced with kind permission.

If this elephant looks like the most intimidating elephant you ever laid eyes on, don't worry! There's a lot to it, but it's all useful, and it's all explicable.

As you can see from this diagram, gender identity – the way that you feel, inside, about your gender – isn't a binary. Instead, it exists on a series of sliding scales. Many people are just male or female, but some are partly male and partly female; others are something else altogether. Anyone whose gender doesn't fit into the idea of the 'gender binary' is usually referred to by the term 'non-binary'. (We'll get back to terminology later...)

You might have seen depictions of 'the gender spectrum' elsewhere – a sort of linear bar with male at one end, female at the other end, and 'everyone else' in the middle – but separate scales are more accurate. This diagram allows people to indicate that their gender is more than one thing at once, or that it exists quite outside of the male/female binary.

(Why am I saying ‘gender’ now, rather than ‘gender identity’? Because there’s a bit of a double standard in the way we talk about people’s genders at the moment: more often than not, people who aren’t trans get to have a ‘gender’, and people who are trans have to make do with a ‘gender identity’. Which has uncomfortable implications: ‘that person just *identifies as* male, they’re not *really* male’. So, while it’s called ‘gender identity’ on this diagram for clarity, in real life you can just say gender, and I recommend that you do.)

You’ll notice that ‘gender expression’ is represented separately here. That’s because gender expression – how you present your gender to the world – might not always match up with how you actually feel about your gender.

There are lots of reasons that people might not always express their gender in a way that aligns with their gender identity. One reason is safety: for example, if someone was assigned male at birth and has a beard, they might not feel safe wearing a dress in all situations, even if their gender is female. But another, more fundamental reason is that my ideas in my head about what constitutes male/female/androgynous gender expression might not always match up with *your* ideas in *your* head about what constitutes each of those things. In fact, chances are they probably don’t. As the owner of a large and beloved collection of flowery shirts, which wouldn’t look out of place on anyone of any gender, I’ve witnessed that first-hand: in the same shirt I’ve been called ‘Sir’, ‘Madam’, and even (on one memorable occasion) ‘young person’ rather than ‘young lady’ or ‘young man’. The same shirt – the same gender expression – was interpreted by different people in three different ways.

What this means, in practice, is that *you can’t tell someone’s gender just from looking at them*. Ever. If you think that has quite profound implications for user experience, you would be right: more on that story later.

Going back to our gender elephant, you’ll notice that sex isn’t represented as a binary either: as well as male or female, people might be intersex. Intersex is a word used to describe people whose bodies, biologically speaking, don’t fit into what our society considers to be the ‘standard’ definition of male or female. It might surprise you to learn that being intersex is pretty common: worldwide, estimates vary between 1% and 2% of people, and many people go through much or all of their lives without learning that they’re intersex. It might also surprise you to learn that where we draw ‘the line’ between male and female, when babies are born, is somewhat arbitrary. In cases where doctors don’t feel they can easily classify a baby’s external genitalia, they break out the tape measure to decide which way it should

go. Remember when I said it was a bit simplistic to say that sex was biological and gender was socially constructed? That's because the way we define which sex is which is also, in many ways, a social construct.

Intersex people aren't the same category as trans people: while some intersex people are trans too, many aren't. And of course being intersex (something that relates to *sex*) isn't the same as being non-binary (a thing that relates to *gender*). What we all share, though, is a need to fight for our human rights and our bodily autonomy in medical situations.

The final aspect of identity that the elephant depicts is sexual orientation: we can see here that who people are physically and emotionally attracted to is completely separate from their gender. Trans people are gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual and everything else under the sun, and this isn't determined by their gender.

Terminology

A disclaimer: what this is not intended to be – and what it cannot be – is a comprehensive summary of all the words relating to trans issues. As a freelance trans awareness trainer, I know that people would love it if I provided them with a complete list of All The Trans Words: which ones are okay, which ones are offensive, and what they all mean. But in an area where language is constantly evolving, that's impossible: people are constantly refining the language we have about gender, and coming up with new terms to more accurately describe their identities. These, however, are some of the words that it's most useful to be aware of and familiar with.

Transgender/trans: an adjective describing anyone who doesn't identify, solely or constantly, with the gender they were assigned at birth. This includes non-binary people. Trans people don't have to have 'done anything about it', medically or socially, in order to be able to describe themselves as *trans*. And remember it's an adjective: I'm not 'a transgender', I'm a transgender *person*.

Cisgender/cis: an adjective describing anyone who does identify, solely and constantly, with the gender they were assigned at birth. Etymologically speaking, the prefix 'cis' is the opposite of 'trans'. It's more helpful to speak about 'cis men' and 'cis women' than it is to speak about 'biological men' and 'biological women', for two reasons. Firstly, 'biological' has uncomfortable connotations: it implies that sex assigned at birth is somehow more inherent, scientific, or valid than gender, and it's often a word used to exclude trans people from spaces

or groups relating to their gender. Secondly, 'biological' as a concept collapses when we start to think about medical transition: if I'm taking hormones that have caused me to develop a lot of the same secondary sexual characteristics as a cis man, at what point do I become 'biologically male'?

Cis(gender) man: someone who was assigned male at birth and identifies as male.

Cis(gender) woman: someone who was assigned female at birth and identifies as female.

Trans man: someone who wasn't assigned male at birth, but identifies as male. The important thing to remember here is that we talk about trans people as the gender they identify as, not as the gender they were assigned at birth.

Trans woman: someone who wasn't assigned female at birth, but identifies as female. The important thing to remember here is that we talk about trans people as the gender they identify as, not as the gender they were assigned at birth.

(**Remember:** 'trans' is an adjective. I'm a trans man, just as I'm a tall man and a young man. I'm not a 'transman', a 'trans-man', or anything else that might imply I fit into a separate category.)

Transsexual: an older term which used to be used as a synonym for 'transgender', and is still used in this way in the Equality Act 2010. (In a 2016 report, the Women & Equalities Select Committee recommended that the wording of the Act be amended to 'transgender', to avoid confusion.) This term has connotations that make some trans people feel uncomfortable, and it's best to avoid it unless a particular trans person has used it about themselves.

Binary gender/the gender binary: the idea that there are only two options for gender, and that everybody is one or the other all the time.

Non-binary: an adjective describing anyone who doesn't identify within the idea of 'binary gender'.

There are lots of terms that non-binary people might use to describe themselves, but I've picked out the most common:

Genderqueer: an adjective with a similar meaning to non-binary, but with more political connotations. 'Queer' means 'I don't fit into your established boxes' – so 'genderqueer' means 'I don't fit into your established gender boxes'.

Agender: an adjective describing anyone who doesn't feel that they have a gender.

Genderfluid: an adjective describing anyone whose gender fluctuates.

Bigender: an adjective describing anyone who feels they have two genders at once.

Transition: the process of starting to live and present in a way that aligns with your gender identity. It can have both medical and social aspects, and every trans person will choose the aspects that are right for them at any given time: every route through transition is equally valid, whether or not it involves medical intervention. The definition of 'full transition' is different for everyone, and the 'end point' does not have to be a 'binary' gender of male or female.

Legal context

Finally, I want to introduce you to the legal context concerning trans rights in the UK.

Equality Act 2010

Under this act, the 'protected characteristic' that covers trans people is called 'gender reassignment'.

This refers to anyone who is, will be, or has undergone transition – so trans people are protected from the moment they start to think about transitioning, for the rest of their lives.

Transition is defined as 'a process, or part of a process, for the purpose of reassigning the person's sex, by changing physiological or other attributes of sex'. That 'or other' is crucial, because it means that the Act protects all trans people: not just those who undertake medical transition.

The Equality Act also specifies that harassment on the basis of a protected characteristic is defined by its effect on the person who is being harassed – not by the intention behind it.

Gender Recognition Act 2004

Contrary to what much of the UK media would have you believe, this act has *nothing to do with toilets*. There is actually no law in the UK that specifically mentions which people are allowed to use which gendered toilets. However, in

practice, stopping a trans person from using a particular toilet on the basis of their trans status would count as harassment as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

Instead, the purpose of the Gender Recognition Act is to enable trans people to get a document called a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC), which recognises their true gender. Currently, there is a lengthy and medicalised application process. The UK government are consulting on proposed simplifications to this process, which would bring it into line with international best practice.

Why would a trans person want a GRC? It's actually legally possible to change your gender marker on most things without one – including your passport. However, you do need one if you want to change your birth certificate, and if you want to change your gender with HMRC. It's also an important validation for many people.

In many ways, the existence of GRCs has caused a lot of problems. In particular, trans people are often inappropriately asked for GRCs to 'prove their gender', which goes against the Equality Act 2010 code of practice.



Trans user experience

Now that everyone has some background knowledge, I want to share some case studies of trans library users' experiences with you. Here I'll introduce you to the users by telling you how long it's been since they came out as trans. This usually isn't a relevant fact for you to know about a trans person, but here it does affect the different issues they face, so I've decided to share it with you.

Case studies

Jasper

Jasper is a trans man who came out two months ago, and who is learning to crochet. One morning, he goes into his university library.

Jasper has only recently come out as trans. He wants to access medical transition, so he's been referred to a gender identity clinic, but he's just been told that the average waiting time is two years, and he knows the letters you get from the clinic are normally an underestimate. He's feeling really depressed about that.

Because Jasper hasn't had any hormone treatment, his voice hasn't broken. As a result, he gets misgendered – referred to by the wrong pronouns or gendered nouns – a lot. So he gets very anxious about talking to people he doesn't know. It takes a lot of energy to actually get up the courage to go into the library.

However, today he's come into the library because he has to pay an invoice for a book he lost over the summer. The invoice has come addressed to his birth name. He doesn't know why that's happened, because he gave the university his deed poll two months ago and got a new student card, so he thought all his records would have been updated.

He goes up to the library desk and tells them why he's there. The person on the desk needs to hand the enquiry on. They turn to their colleague and say, 'This lady's here to pay her invoice...'

Jasper feels physically sick and his heart starts hammering. He screws up his courage and says, 'Sorry, actually I'm not a lady, I'm a man.'

The member of staff looks utterly taken aback. It's obvious they've never thought about this kind of thing before. First they're confused, then they get defensive, feel guilty and start trying to explain themselves, digging an ever-bigger hole in the process.

'What? But it says here... Oh. Oh I see. It's so difficult not to offend people these days! You're not offended, are you? It's an understandable mistake, it's just so

many girls have such short hair these days! And your voice... Sorry love – I mean mate...’

Jasper says, ‘I’ve changed my name to Jasper,’ and provides his student card as proof. The member of staff updates his name suspiciously quickly. Jasper had planned to ask them to check thoroughly – he wonders if there are notes on his records referring to him as ‘she’ and his old name, from when he originally lost the book. But he’s now feeling too anxious and uncomfortable to continue the conversation.

Later that week, he orders an inter-library loan. In his library, you have to pay online as part of the request. The payments portal takes him to a different website which, again, addresses him by his birth name. He cringes at the thought of having to go into the library and challenge this. He decides just not to bother.

Alex

Alex is a non-binary person who came out eighteen months ago, and who plays competitive wheelchair basketball. They go into their local library.

Alex needs to use the toilet, but they’re nervous about asking, because they’ve had some bad experiences before in different organisations. Sometimes, the person they’ve asked has just said, ‘The ladies are upstairs,’ or ‘The gents are the first door on the left.’ This isn’t helpful to Alex: they actually want to use a gender-neutral toilet, because they don’t feel comfortable in single-gendered spaces. They’re not using their wheelchair today, which means they can’t rely on just finding an ungendered accessible toilet.

As they approach the library desk, they spot a library assistant with a badge on her lanyard saying ‘She/her/hers’. They’re struck by this: they realise this means she’s signalling that she’s aware trans people exist, and that she knows you can’t tell anyone’s gender just from looking at them. They immediately feel more comfortable, and decide to ask this library assistant where the toilets are.

The library assistant tells them where all the toilets are, and how to access them: ‘They’re all on the first floor: ladies, gents and gender-neutral. The lift’s over there.’

Alex makes a mental note to tell their friend Samira that this library has gender-neutral toilets. Samira is a trans woman, but prefers to use the gender-neutral toilets because she isn’t always read as female, so she feels safer in there.

Alex browses the library for a while. They hear an announcement: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the helpdesk will be closing in fifteen minutes.’ They feel frustrated: what about the people who aren’t ladies or gentlemen? Clearly there are some

clued-up library assistants, but the message of non-binary awareness hasn't trickled down. They wonder, 'What's wrong with just saying, "Good evening everyone"?'

A few weeks later, Alex gets an email saying one of their books is overdue and has been requested by another borrower. They realise this is a book they left at their parents' house. Although they've been out as non-binary to their friends for eighteen months, they only recently came out to their parents and they reacted very badly. Alex doesn't feel particularly safe going back to their parents' house to get the book.

Normally they wouldn't want to explain a story like this to someone in a position of authority. But they think back to the library assistant with the pronoun badge, and decide they do feel comfortable talking about it with her.

Samira

Samira, Alex's friend, is a trans woman who came out three years ago, and has just run her first half-marathon. Inspired by Alex telling her that the local library has gender-neutral toilets, she pops in.

Samira is excited to spot a display of books about LGBT people marking LGBT History Month. But when she looks closer, she notices all the books are by and about white British or American people. As a British Asian person, she's a bit frustrated. Could they really not find *any* books by or about LGBT people of colour?

Later that year, she's browsing Twitter and she notices that the library has posted a new blog to celebrate Eid. She clicks on it, and it recommends a great selection of books and films – but not one of them has any LGBT content.

Samira, being a proactive library user, decides that maybe she can help: she can find something relevant in the library catalogue and tweet them to suggest they include it in the blog post. She searches for 'transgender' in the catalogue. 'Hopefully,' she thinks, 'I can click on one of the subject headings in the record to browse all the trans books.'

But the subject headings for the first book that comes up are not the sort of thing she wants to click on.

'Transsexuals'

'Transvestism'

'Sex change'

'Sexual dysfunctions (psychological)'

Samira stops reading. She feels invisible: not only has the library failed to consider

the possibility that trans Muslims exist, they also haven't considered that trans people might read the subject headings on their catalogue. She feels really uncomfortable about the suggestion that being trans is a 'sexual dysfunction'. She probably won't bother clicking on the library's blogs in the future, or engaging with any themed events they have. The staff who know her are frustrated and confused by why she doesn't turn up to events that they think 'are aimed at her demographic'.

Ana

Ana is a trans woman who came out ten years ago. She's been living as female for ten years and none of her colleagues know she's trans. She works as a librarian, although before that, she did a PhD in medieval Russian.

Ana goes into work as normal. It's March, and her colleague Karen has made a display of books for International Women's Day. One of the books is by Sheila Jeffreys, who's well known as a feminist scholar but also as having very transphobic views. Ana is shocked to see it, but wonders if Karen is just unaware, so decides to have a polite conversation about it.

Unfortunately, it seems that Karen is aware, and she expresses some transphobic views. Ana is shocked. She doesn't tell Karen she's trans, but she notices that over the next couple of weeks Karen stares hard at her every time she goes into the ladies toilets. She also starts telling a lot of anecdotes about Caitlyn Jenner when Ana is in earshot, in which she calls Caitlyn by her birth name. Ana feels really uncomfortable.

After a few weeks of this, Ana decides to speak to her manager. She knows that harassment, under the Equality Act 2010, is anything done on the basis of a protected characteristic that creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for someone. Her manager takes it seriously. She knows that legally, harassment is about the effect on the person being harassed, not about the intention behind it.

Ana's manager then asks Ana what else she thinks could be done to make their library better for trans staff. Ana suggests a few things. One is clarifying the medical leave policy: she knows that trans people need guaranteed leave for their transition-related medical appointments, since they can't rearrange them.

She also suggests that when they have meetings with external people, they give people the option to introduce themselves with their pronouns as well as their name, if they feel comfortable doing so. Her manager tries this out at the next meeting. Unfortunately one of the people present mocks the idea, and Ana's manager lets it

go unchallenged. Ana feels much less comfortable in the meeting now, rather than more so.

Staff make the user experience

Why, you might ask, was my last example about a member of staff? What happened to *user* experience?

Ana's case enabled me to talk about how important it is to support trans library staff. But more than that, talking about members of staff calls our attention to something vital: we can't just think about our trans users and ignore the people who are providing that user experience. The trans people in my stories have had many good and bad experiences, and the difference in every case has been made by the actions of members of staff. All of the members of staff who featured in my case studies have different backgrounds and contexts, which affect the way they respond to trans issues at work.

Angela, who Jasper approached about his invoice, always calls people 'lady' and 'gentleman' because she thinks it's rude not to. She occasionally sees articles about trans people in the paper but doesn't really understand what it's all about.

Esther, who was wearing a pronoun badge when Alex approached her, has a couple of trans friends and is active in trans-inclusive internet communities. One of her jobs is putting out the newspapers in the morning, and if they have transphobic headlines – which she's noticed is increasingly common these days – she wraps the supplement around the outside of the main paper so that the headline is covered up. This act is invisible to all the trans people who visit the library, but it helps to ensure they feel comfortable.

Joe, who works in Samira's local library, once had a phone call from someone who gave their name as Amy but had a deep voice he interpreted as male. He was aware that he didn't want to offend anyone, but he was also aware of his data protection responsibilities, and he didn't know how to manage the two.

Sharon, who works as a security guard in Ana's library, recently received some new guidance to help support trans library users. As a result of her conversations with Ana, the library manager brought in a clear procedure to follow in the event of complaints about people being in the 'wrong toilet'. Sharon feels much more comfortable now she knows what the rules are.

* * *

Action points: proactivity and procedures

With all this in mind, what can we do to create trans-inclusive libraries?

First and foremost, we have to look to our staff – and I mean all of our staff. It's essential that we cascade this knowledge: we need to spread confidence and familiarity with trans issues, and make sure trans users don't experience a 'lottery' in which they get a different experience depending on which member of staff is on the desk that day. The solution to this is to proactively create procedures that all staff can follow.

These should include:

Updating records: if a trans person wants to change their name or gender marker, you need a checklist of what you need to update. If you work within a larger organisation like a university, you might think everything is controlled by your central records system – but is it really? Are there no notes on records, or old invoices, or datasets that only update once a year?

Safeguarding confidentiality: you need to consider this when updating records, too. Is it possible for someone to work out that a library user is trans – for example, by comparing an old invoice letter to a new one? Do notes on library records use pronouns and names?

Talking about people in the third person: you might think this doesn't happen while they're present, but in fact it happens every time you have to ask a colleague for help or discuss a problem. Rather than guessing people's genders, we can avoid talking about their gender at all: instead, we can use their name, or gender-neutral descriptors such as 'student', 'person' or 'user'.

Non-binary inclusivity: avoid phrases like 'Ladies and gentlemen', which imply there are only two genders. Instead, try 'Good evening everyone', or 'Honoured guests'. Similarly, make sure you offer non-binary options on forms (including more than two gender options, and gender-neutral titles such as Mx) and reword policies to use neutral pronouns (e.g. amend 'If a student forgets his/her library card' to 'If a student forgets their library card').

Phone calls: avoid making assumptions about someone's gender based on their voice. If you need to verify their identity, use something that doesn't relate to gender, such as their postcode.

Send signals of trans inclusivity: for example, normalise the idea that you can't tell what pronouns someone uses just from looking at them. The example I gave

was a pronoun badge on a lanyard, but you can also include pronouns in your email signature [e.g. ‘Kit Heyam, Library Assistant (he/him/his)’], leave a space for them on conference name badges, or include them as part of introductions in external meetings. In the last case, though, remember that if you’re chairing a meeting you’re responsible for explaining the pronoun introductions to people who haven’t come across it before, and for shutting down any opposition – so make sure you feel confident in doing that.

Intersectionality: remember trans people aren’t *just* trans, and represent diversity among trans people just as you do with other groups.

Harassment: recognise that, legally speaking, this is defined by the effect an action has and not by the intent behind it.

Toilets:

- provide gender-neutral options – and signpost them with a picture of a toilet, rather than a mixed-up gender symbol
- don’t assume you know which toilet someone wants to use
- have a clear procedure for dealing with complaints about trans people using the toilet. Establish what the complaint is about: if someone has harassed someone else in a toilet, then follow the harassment policy and make it clear that the fact of the person being trans has nothing to do with that. If it’s just a complaint about a trans person using the loo and minding their own business, then make sure people can enforce a policy that trans people can use the toilet that matches the gender they identify as. It’s also helpful to signpost this policy inside toilets, as this can pre-emptively stop complaints.

Listen and collaborate: Make it clear that you welcome feedback from trans users – and if you can, reach out to student trans groups or local peer support groups to ask how you can improve. Make sure you compensate them for their time if you possibly can, even if it’s only with refreshments or printer credit.

The most constructive thing you can do in pursuit of trans-inclusive libraries is to build these points into clear procedural guidance, and accompany the guidance with a list of further resources. By doing this, you can help your staff to build familiarity with trans issues and confidence in discussing them – giving them the tools to create a positive trans user experience.

References and further resources

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