



ARTICLE

Investigating Gender Expression

Some students struggle to see gender stereotypes, but telling personal stories can open their eyes.

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Many of my junior high and high school students in rural Ohio are not convinced that gender stereotypes exist. Social dynamics here enforce strict gender roles, and the community usually assigns pariah status to those who deviate. The roles are so entrenched that it is difficult to get students to recognize them. That is why I started teaching a unit on gender stereotypes and gender expression. The goal is to show the students that a variety of social factors—rather than innate forces—lead to the gender roles we have come to expect.

In my first years as a beginning teacher, I focused the discussion and readings on the harmful effects of gender stereotypes on women. I made only a passing reference to our culture's masculine stereotypes because I was more acutely aware of and concerned about issues of women's rights. As time passed, I realized that, in order to cover radical ground, I needed to delve into a conversation about the rigidity of stereotypical masculinity.

I now begin the unit with an illustration of the socialized dualism of male-female gender constructs. I ask my pupils to list toys they played with in their youth and to critically analyze the messages those toys communicated. We then make list of qualities males and females are "supposed to have." These lists prompt discussion on a personal level. The topic of gender expression arises as the students discover they exhibit qualities from both the male and the female lists.

At this point I ask my students to recall and discuss a situation in which they were limited by a gender stereotype. Usually a number of students tell stories of not being able to pursue activities they loved and thrived in because someone in their community told them they were the wrong gender for participation.

After we have explored personal stories, we then examine texts by or about famous authors, inventors and businesspeople who at some time in their lives were told they needed to reconsider their career paths or change aspects about themselves

because they acted outside of gender boundaries. We discuss the effects of these limitations on those individuals and what society would have lost if they had bowed under society's pressure to conform.

I also show excerpts of the documentary *Mansome* from director Morgan Spurlock. The documentary explores serious questions, such as, "What is a man?" and, "What activities or products previously considered the exclusive domain of women now garner a huge male market?" Actors Will Arnett and Jason Bateman tackle these questions through humor, an indispensable ingredient in a discussion of masculinity with the more reluctant (and boisterous) of my students.

During the unit, I ask my students to write about how society both benefits and loses from a narrow portrayal of masculinity. By asking for the benefits of conventional masculinity, I refrain from demonizing the perception of masculinity in my students' culture. This reflection on what society loses when people comply with gender norms inevitably uncovers the need for the students to expand their perceptions of how men should act.

At the end of the unit, I invite my students to consider how they could change or challenge stereotypes in their everyday lives. One student carried out a poster campaign to increase awareness of how gender stereotypes can lead to bullying. Another student organized a small group meeting of students from other classes to draw connections between our unit discussion and other literature about gender.

What starts out as a simple lesson on uncovering boy-girl socialization blossoms into a critical analysis of our cultural norms and an honest appraisal of the students' desire to live those values or to work against them. At the very least, my students conclude the unit with seeing the gender dynamics that were formerly invisible. Ideally, they then will begin work in earnest to promote awareness and help their school and community become places where units like this no longer have to begin by convincing anyone they are necessary.

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