

Trans Students' Right to Their Own Gender in Professional Communication Courses: A Textbook Analysis of Attire and Voice Standards in Oral Presentations

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Abstract

Oral presentations are a common genre in technical and business communication courses. While it is important for students to develop a professional ethos when presenting information, in this article I argue that textbooks' discussion of professional dress and voice privilege cisgendered bodies and erase the differences and bodily experiences that transgendered individuals face. This may cause dissonance in trans students who may come to believe that they must choose between their genders and being professional.

Keywords

culture, social justice, presentations, voice, attire, professionalization, transgender students, gender identity

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Introduction

One semester while teaching a business writing course at a large, public institution I had a very quiet international student, whom I will call Sam, in my course. I did not know at the time that Sam identified as a transwoman until the middle of the term when I gave students their mid-semester evaluation scores, which included a participation score. I made sure to give students individualized feedback and one of my suggestions to Sam was that they¹ speak up a little more forcefully as I had difficulty understanding what they were saying. Sam responded in an email that she was transgender and that in addition to taking hormones, she was practicing sounding more feminine by speaking with a soft, higher pitched voice, which made it difficult for me and her peers to hear her. In addition, because Sam was an international student from a country that did not respect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, she worried about receiving a low grade which would mean having to return to her country. At the same time, she found difficulty building friendships or collaborative working relationships in her classes because she worried about letting her fellow students know that she was transgender.

A few weeks afterward, students were to give their marketing presentation and Sam had joined a group of three male students. As a result, they had arrived in dark business suits, crisply ironed shirts, and striking ties. Sam, however, had arrived dressed down, wearing only a simple button-down shirt, a pair of khakis, and a pair of sneakers. Her group members, apparently planning on this, came prepared with extra clothing and supplied her with a men's blazer when she arrived, and even tied her tie for her because she had not learned how to do so. Taking this sight in during the students' prep time before they gave their oral presentation, I realized that I had not created a safe space in my classroom; more importantly, I had not taught my students about the importance of LGBT issues in the business writing classroom or the professional workplace. Sam's groupmates were not purposefully doing anything inappropriate. They did not know about Sam's struggle and her female gender identity. From their perspective, they were simply helping a fellow male student be more professional. I thought about how awkward I would feel wearing clothes that were not mine, that spoke to a different gender. I checked in with Sam privately afterward and apologized for having put her in such a position, but Sam seemed resigned to it. She stated that she had experienced other microaggressions (my wording) in her college career but thanked me for listening to her.

While we may see this simply as an instance of a transgender student being put into an uncomfortable situation, this event adds to (and highlights) the discriminatory experiences that transstudents face at the college level. Beemyn and Brauer (2015) recently summarized some of the findings from existing scholarship that showcase such transgressions against trans students: "Trans students," they state, "face discrimination in campus housing, bathrooms,

locker rooms, and athletics . . . ; are invisible in most college curricular; and lack access to supportive health care and counseling services” (p. 478). Add to that, when trans students request to use different gender identity markers other than those that appear on “official” documents, professors and university-wide technological systems (e.g., Banner and learning management systems) have difficulty using them (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Wentling, 2015).

Given these failures in higher education with regard to our trans students, I invite us to begin examining how our tools and ideals about teaching students what it means to present themselves professionally may clash with our own desire to promote socially just practices. What I mean is that we as instructors need to be mindful of what we and our instructional materials ask our students to do in their assignments so that we can aim to create spaces that are both socially responsible and just. Specifically, we must be cautious not to privilege practices that favor cisgender individuals (individuals whose gender identity matches their birth sex), or we must at the very least highlight the importance of asking our students to consider other ways of approaching otherwise seemingly straightforward practices. Reflecting on my pedagogy, I can see that the very things that were causing difficulties for Sam—speaking and dressing—had been presented in very specific ways in our textbooks. In my effort to professionalize students to prepare them for their future workplaces, I had not considered that textbook guidelines such as these can be problematic for certain students, particularly given our continuously changing classroom demographics.

In this article, I will analyze these two aspects of oral presentations—attire and voice—which many of the textbooks that we use in professional communication courses present to students as being essential to proper professional communication in the workplace. I call our attention to how oral presentation instructions discuss attire and voice in ways that are problematic for trans populations. Through a textual analysis of chapters on oral presentations in professional communication textbooks, I highlight the ways in which the language used can cause trans students to feel like they cannot be professional and express their gender identity simultaneously, thus putting them in difficult situations where they may have to sacrifice one for the other. Ultimately, I argue that enacting social justice in our classrooms can help to not only promote inclusivity in those spaces but can teach our students about how to foster inclusivity in professional settings. Although social justice is contextually bound, I discuss how I have adopted a Students’ Right to Their Own Gender approach (adapted from the Students’ Right to Their Own Language statement in composition) as one method to promote social justice.

Social Justice in Professional Communication

Sam’s experiences in my class illustrate how diverse our students are. As these demographics continue to change and grow, we need to be more prepared for

instructing students in ways that they understand and for confronting a range of issues embedded with the cultural implications that these students face in professional settings. In their discussion of the history of diversity in professional communication research, Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) note how researchers have increasingly been paying attention to issues involving disability, gender, and—though scant—race in professional communication theory, pedagogy, and research. Noticeably absent from this overview, however, are issues related to gender identity. I do not believe that this is an intentional omission on the part of the researchers; rather, this absence can be attributed to the fact that very little has been published in professional communication journals pertaining to LGBT issues and thus cannot show up as a thread in Jones, Moore, and Walton's antenarrative. Indeed, a quick search for the terms "gay," "lesbian," "GLBT," or "LGBT," and "transgender" across professional communication journals brings up limited article results; none of which explore these terms as topics of inquiry in teaching or in professional contexts².

In many ways, such dearth in our scholarship is to be expected. It has only been recently that matters pertaining to transgender lives have come to the forefront in cultural and professional contexts within the United States. That said, some of us may object to turning our attention in research and pedagogy to discussing our trans students because there might be very few of them in our classes, and therefore we might believe that they do not merit such consideration. Or, more broadly, we might feel that because all of our students will have to embed themselves in the dominant culture, making our classrooms more equitable for trans students might set them up for failure in professional contexts. I will address both of these concerns by discussing how diversity, inclusivity, and social justice interconnect with each other.

As Jones, Moore, and Walton's (2016) study attests, issues of diversity do indeed fall within the realm of professional communication. The presence of changing demographics in professional contexts provides opportunities to question our practices and to change them in order to facilitate more inclusive environments in our classrooms and in workplace settings. We can see this attention to diversity most prominently in how our discussions of gender have changed in recent decades. Feminist approaches to professional and technical communication (PTC) have helped to illuminate gender norms and differences (Smith & Thompson, 2002; Thompson, 2004). From these studies, practitioners and researchers have gained a better understanding of how gender bias is implicated in what we have come to consider "professional" and "objective" communication. To highlight a few examples, such work has helped to showcase accepted gender bias in language (Frank & Treichler, 1989), critiqued women's visual representation in organizations (David, 2001), and opened up genres typically not associated with professional communication because they have been historically seen as feminine and not professional (Allen, 1990; Durack, 1997; Fleitz, 2010).

In addition to gender, other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are all factors that can be used as the basis for marginalization and oppression within larger institutional and professional organizational structures. While in recent decades there has been a push in institutions, organizations, and workplaces to promote diversity through hiring, diversity alone does not necessarily lead to inclusivity or a sense of equity within these sites. Diversity is concerned with making sure that there is representation of various viewpoints and experiences across different aspects of a group or an organization. Although important, making space for those experiences necessitates that such experiences be welcomed and listened to by creating an inclusive environment. Inclusivity invites dialogue and allows for these othered bodies to act and work in their institutional, organizational, and professional settings in genuine ways (Arruda, 2016; Kapila, Hines, & Searby, 2016; Riordan, 2014). Yet, it must be reiterated that inclusivity does not happen on its own by default simply by focusing on diversity. Rather, one needs to actively create spaces and transform policies through social justice work so that inclusivity for all can take place within any given context.

Social justice has been conceptualized in various ways in fields such as social work (Duffy, 2010; Olson, 2018; Pelton, 2001) and teacher education (Garii & Rule, 2009; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016; Pohan & Mathison, 1999). At its core, social justice seeks to “promote a common humanity of all social groups by valuing diversity and challenging injustice and disparities in all its forms” (Leong & Pickren, 2017, p. 779). Moreover, Bell (2007) states that “The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 1). This goal is realized by working collaboratively to create institutional and social change through participatory practices that are “affirming of human agency” (p. 2). A social justice mindset then, as Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) write, “extends diversity work by focusing on action [and] this action . . . can lead to inclusion” (p. 219). With its active engagement in systems and policies, social justice works to promote equity and inclusion for those who are and have historically been discounted. Indeed, social justice “can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced” (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 242).

Those who engage in social justice work engage in active forms of advocacy that range from protests for changes in policies to working on a smaller scale to accommodate the needs of those who are oppressed. For PTCs, our skillsets often can be put to good use advocating on behalf of marginalized communities (Hart-Davidson, 2013, pp. 69–70). However, in focusing on forms of advocacy such as joining public protests or assisting grassroots organizations to engage in political processes, it can be easy to see how social justice work falls outside the scope of PTC (Colton & Holmes, 2018, p. 9). While I do believe that as PTC instructors we have a responsibility to use our writing and critical thinking skills

beyond our workplaces in order to create more equitable societies, we can also enact social justice within our professional and disciplinary contexts by working toward equity in our research (Agboka, 2012; Jones, 2016; Medina, 2014; Pimentel & Gutierrez, 2014), administrative work (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan, & Patton, 2010; Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2010), and teaching (Haas, 2012; Jones, 2016). That is, I share in Colton and Holmes' (2018) belief that PTCs "can productively enact social justice themselves without waiting for institutional sanction to change or better reflect a more ethical social arrangement" (p. 13). Particularly within the realm of our roles as instructors, there are actions that we can take right now within our professional settings to help enact social justice.

Keeping in mind that social justice is not a single method, but a practice, we can work toward the creation and promotion of educational and professional settings that are not just diverse but inclusive. Recently, there has been a push to bring social justice issues into the classroom (see e.g., Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Adams et al., 2000). Social justice-focused pedagogies typically "focus upon strategies and materials for teaching by, to, for, and about underrepresented, targeted groups" (Adams, 2007, p. 24) or on teaching learners about their socialization into oppressive systems (Bell, 2007, p. 2). Such approaches have not gone without criticism, however, as some have painted this push for social justice in educational settings as instructors pushing their own personal beliefs on students to indoctrinate them into their causes (Rochester, 2017).

This brings us back to the two main objections to focusing our pedagogy and research on social justice that I listed earlier. I submit that teaching students about social justice engages them to learn about the changing nature of professional communication practices. We should not forget that dominant cultures are changeable and changing. While it is true that we do indeed teach the genres that are privileged in workplace settings, we must remember that such genres are social and continue to be malleable (Miller, 1979, 1984). As Porter, Sullivan, Blythe, Grabill and Miles (2000) assert, disciplines, institutions, and corporations, "are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices, and so are changeable" (p. 611). The same can be said for policies that impact the diversity and inclusivity of their organizations. Within the context of social justice, to not pay attention to issues of diversity in workplaces or in workplace communication courses is to close off opportunities for facilitating positive change.

Social justice is not a stamp of approval (one that qualifies certain classrooms or practices as equitable or not). Rather, social justice is an "ongoing and evolving practice of verifying political equality across all parts of an individual's workplace context" (Colton & Holmes, 2018, p. 21). The same is true for our classrooms. Thirty years ago, pieces needed to be written and published to teach

writers to avoid gendered nouns and pronouns—most of these rules today have been codified in various editions of style manuals including the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2009, pp.73–74), the American Medical Association’s (2007) *Manual of Style* (pp. 412–413), the *Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago, 2017, pp. 283–284), and the Modern Languages Association’s (2009) *Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (pp. 49–50). Given today’s workplace climate, to teach students to use nonsexist language but to avoid any discussion of the relationship between workplace communication practices and gender identity seems lopsided and not evolving toward welcoming, inclusive workplace environments.

Defining Terms

Before continuing further, it is important for me to explain my use of the word “transgender” in this article as it is a complex and often contentious term. News and media (and—as I will explain—even I in this article) frequently discuss how organizational policies such as those mentioned earlier will impact transgender individuals, when most of the issues covered have more to do with transsexualism than transgenderism. Transsexual individuals feel disconnected from their anatomic and biological sex and instead see their gender identity aligning more closely with that of the opposite sex (Meister et al., 2017, p. 1). For example, a female-to-male transsexual individual, though born female, would not find his gender identity congruent with his biologically inherent female sex or his socially accepted feminine gender role. Rather, he would see an alignment with a male sex or masculine gender norms. As a result, this individual may choose to transition, taking on more masculine characteristics in terms of appearance, voice, and behaviors (Cromwell, 1999; Schilt, 2010). Gender reassignment surgery may also be elected to change his body to be anatomically male. Often—though not always—these are the individuals who receive media coverage when anti-transgender bathroom laws are discussed because such laws seem to have the most pronounced implications for them.

Transgender, however, is a much larger and broader term that encompasses a wider number of individuals. According to Green (2004), while transgenderism can encompass transsexuals who cross gender boundaries from one gender to another, the term frequently connotes any larger break in established gender roles and gender identity. For example, as Galupo, Stuart, and Siegel (2015) discuss, many transgender individuals, though they cross gender boundaries, may not necessarily find an alignment with the opposite sex and gender roles (p. 549). This may mean that they may reject the binary division of gender and sex (that men should behave or look a certain way—in terms of appearance or anatomy) or that they “do not see their bodies as incongruent with their gender identity” (that though possessing a male body, they may think of themselves as

female without any need to change their bodies to match this identity because they view sex—not just gender—fluidly; p. 549).

The term “transgender,” then, means something much broader than we are led to believe from popular sources when they report on controversies regarding individuals’ freedom to select the “correct” bathroom that matches their gender identity. As I have shown, “transgender” does encompass these types of concerns, but it includes a wider discussion of identity and binaries. In the same way, I use “trans” and “transgender” to allude to experiences that fall under the broad umbrella of boundary-crossing when it comes to sex and gender identity but do segue to focus on transsexual individuals because of Sam’s experience in my class. We must remember though that both terms, as Galupo et al. (2015) state, are inclusive of a number of individuals who may not fit into simple categories such as “transwomen, transmen, bigender, two-spirit, androgynous, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and gender variant” (p. 549). With that in mind, it is also important for me to note that the terms “cis” and “cisgender” are used as counterparts to “trans” and “transgender.” Cisgender individuals experience no incongruence with their corresponding sex. A cis man was born male and identifies as a male, despite whatever gender norms he may adopt or disregard. A trans man, on the other hand, may have been born female, but identifies as male, and may have transitioned, be transitioning, hoping to transition, or not, as the diversity of trans experiences illustrate earlier.

Oral Presentations as Workplace Genres

With our understanding of social justice and transgender identity in mind, I would like us to return to Sam’s experience presented at the beginning of this piece. As Sam learns about professional presentations, she is learning that there exist genres in workplace contexts that compromise her gender identity. This rings true in various aspects of job-related experiences for trans individuals. Even before they are hired trans individuals face scrutiny in either “passing” for their desired gender or must pretend to ascribe to the gender norms that feel alien to them. Moreover, even if they successfully interview, there are background checks to complete and references to call, which, for transitioning or transitioned trans applicants, often make mention of a previous name and gender, causing confusion and rejection from hiring managers (see Schilt, 2010, in particular pp. 92, 105–106, 116, and 143).

Beyond the discrimination that transgender individuals face when applying for jobs (Wrigley, 2013, pp. 144–145), even when they secure employment they may not perceive these work environments to be safe places to divulge or express their gender identity (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014).³ In essence, the workplace circulates with genres that can “out” transitioned trans individuals or reinforce to transgender individuals who are transitioning or have not transitioned that they are not welcome.

For example, in salaried positions with benefits, one must often choose a health plan immediately after one's hiring. Health-care plans can be a difficult genre to navigate and for some transgender individuals can be a source of disappointment if they do not cover the costs of transitioning procedures. Moreover, policies that discuss (or do not discuss) what bathrooms can be used by whom can also cause transgender employees to fear retaliation by coworkers and upper management. Given the power that such genres have in their daily lives, it is not surprising then that, as Dixon (2015) noted, transgender individuals consider and reconsider their employers' nondiscrimination policies throughout their socialization into a company (pp. 25–27).

That said, unlike health-care documents and office policies, oral presentations are a workplace genre that employees in professional settings produce, not just consume. More to the point, oral presentations are a particularly relevant genre for trans individuals given the way that they enforce bodily prescriptions or at the very least make assumptions about a presenter's body. And in many professional communication courses, this genre is taught as a standard assignment—as evidenced by how often it appears in PTC textbooks. I ask us, though, to consider how the ways we teach this genre might unnecessarily produce inequity in our classrooms for students like Sam who are learning to professionalize, but who may come away thinking that they might have to give up a piece of who they are in the work world. Certainly, while not all employers have open-minded policies on transgender individuals, we must remember that social justice seeks to affirm one's humanity and to provide individuals from marginalized groups with the agency they need to have a voice in organizational and social contexts. I posit that opportunities exist for furthering this social justice work in textbooks' (and by extension, our) teaching of oral presentations.

Looking at the research on oral presentations in business and professional settings, one would not think that this genre was contentious at all. In the 1980s and 1990s, much of the literature centered on helping oral communication instructors with tips to guide students in their production of effective presentations. Often these studies focused on helping students organize and memorize different parts of a presentation (Calabrese, 1989; MacFarland, 1980) or helping students combat nervousness (Murray, 1989; Tsui, 1992). Not surprisingly, with the ubiquity of Microsoft PowerPoint and other digital presentation aids, the late 1990s and much of the 2000s saw many articles on helping students give oral presentations with PowerPoint (see Bayless, 2004; Hertz, van Woerkum, & Kerkhof, 2015; Kernbach, Bresciani, & Eppler, 2015; Mackiewicz, 2008; Pathak, 2001). Over time, this has given way to introducing new technological methods of presentation delivery such as via virtual meeting software like GoToMeeting (Flatley, 2007) or through Ted Talk formats (Kedrowicz & Taylor, 2016). Attention to these aspects of oral presentations makes sense given that professional communication courses such as business writing or technical communication provide students experience with many types of genres and

situations that they will encounter. However, they do not pay attention to the identity of the student presenter, which, as Dannels (2003, 2009) has shown, does not simply evaporate when presenting. That is, oral presentations as assignments create opportunities for students to learn about professional conventions and expectations, but because students do not readily abandon their roles they can often feel conflicted as to how to negotiate between their roles as students and burgeoning professionals. This attention to distinct roles is particularly important because it signals that identity is a significant factor in delivering presentations. In light of the previous scholarship mentioned earlier on oral presentations, this look at (gender) identity might seem irrelevant or disconnected from teaching oral communication skills. This is understandable given that for many of us who are not trans, we can only see this genre as being neutral (as I once did). As Catalano, McCarthy, and Shlasko (2017) state, when we are privileged in certain circumstances, we may not feel advantaged in any particular way by policies and practices that marginalize groups to which we do not belong (p. 222). Yet, taking our own position as a given and ignoring how others' identity impacts their experience in professional contexts closes off opportunities for inclusion. To foster more inclusivity means paying attention to this difference and creating opportunities for marginalized individuals.

One way to promote social justice is to develop materials that actively foster inclusivity for our students. Before we can do that, however, we need to take stock of what our current practices and methods are in the classroom so that we gain a better understanding of what may be problematic. Specifically, I ask us to take a critical look at how our textbooks may hinder our attempts to work toward social justice in subtle (and sometimes explicit) ways.

Historically, textbooks and handbooks have played a large part in shaping the fields within professional communication (Conners, 1982). However, even before the rise of professional communication courses, handbooks prescribed best practices for presenting one's self visually and orally in public speaking. To illustrate, in *On the Ideal Orator*, Cicero (2001) notes that effective communicators use gentle tones of voice, signal restraint through controlled facial expressions, and choose words carefully (1.182). Or in the *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintillian (1856) prescribes the proper way a speaker should wear a toga—wrapping it on the left hand “makes an orator look like a madman” while wearing it over one's right shoulder “indicates effeminacy and delicacy” (p. 380). And in the introduction to his *Lectures on Rhetoric*, Hugh Blair (1836) offers that a speaker should appear modest to gain the trust of an audience and that this “modesty should appear, not only in his [sic] expression but in his whole manner; in his looks, in his gestures, and in the tone of his voice” (p. 161). These examples illustrate how public speaking has always been tied to the body—whether through facial expression, vocal control, or attire. While a thorough discussion of the history of elocution, movement, and dress falls

outside the scope of this project, it is nevertheless important to stress that in one form or another, edifying lectures and texts have sought to teach speakers proper ways of presenting themselves physically and aurally to an audience.

Contemporary textbooks in professional communication may speak to our own contexts, yet they continue to carry a similar attention to the body. As I will discuss, however, the needs of our contemporary society require that we reconsider how these lessons may be received by marginalized members of our community who are studying to become professional communicators. For transgender individuals specifically, as I will show, voice and attire seem to be areas of stress and contention that we need to pay close attention to when we teach directly from or even borrow lessons from textbooks in professional communication. Much like Sam's example showcases, if transgender individuals choose to remain androgynous or if they are in the process of transitioning to their true gender identity, or if they identify as nonbinary, the language embedded in these textbooks can place them in difficult positions and stymie our attempts to create and teach inclusivity. The remainder of this piece provides my methods for studying these artifacts, discusses the results of said analysis, and concludes with an elaboration of how we can adopt a Students' Right to Their Own Gender approach to teaching in business and professional communication courses—all within the context of aiming to create a more socially just classroom for transgender students.

Methods

To demonstrate this tension between professional expectations and transgender identity, I analyzed how professional communication textbooks have discussed delivering professional presentations, noting aspects that may be problematic for trans students with specific attention to descriptions of attire and voice. I chose these specifically due to the extant scholarship surrounding transgender experiences in college and work settings, which were, unsurprisingly, mirrored in Sam's experiences in my class. So, for example, even though eye contact is stressed in the delivery of oral presentations throughout these textbooks, nothing in the existing scholarship suggests that this is an area of stress or difficulty for transgender individuals. Voice and attire, on the other hand, are.

I have centered this analysis on textbooks specifically because they are a ubiquitous record of classroom instruction that convey the accepted means and methods of instruction in college courses (Alred & Thelen, 1993). A single course adoption can have dozens if not hundreds of students purchasing and reading the material. In addition to having a large number of readers, textbooks are also the most constant and portable artifact of study. Students can access their print and digital textbooks easily—much more easily than they can their instructors—and these texts represent and communicate the values and principles that we want them to learn. Moreover, as professional

communication textbooks, these artifacts presumably act as an extension of the values that employers would emphasize to their current and prospective employees and as a result carry substantial weight in how instructors refer to them for lessons, exercises, and genres. Thus, we can see how, as theorized by Read and Michaud (2018), the ubiquitous requirement of textbooks across professional communication courses “suggests that textbooks may exert a powerful influence over the curriculum and pedagogy” of these courses (p. 234). For these reasons, many researchers have analyzed the content of professional communication textbooks in order to discuss how students are taught about relevant topics such as design, usability, and ethics, to name a few (Chong, 2016; DeVoss, Jasken, & Hayden, 2002; Hartung, 1998; Matveeva, 2007; Miles, 1997; Rood, 2013). Few studies have looked at sexual difference in communication and writing textbooks, but those that have frequently note the absence of contexts and experiences that represent GLBT issues (Marinara, Alexander, Banks, & Blackmon, 2009; McPherson, 2000; McPherson & O’Hara, 1999).

Unfortunately, there is no publicly accessible way to determine which textbooks circulate the most widely in our courses; book publishers remain the only entities with such data for their own sales and typically keep it private (Harvard College Library, 2016). Nor is there an easy way to learn how many or which textbooks are used in technical and business communication or writing courses across the country and beyond. I amassed my corpus of textbooks to analyze by searching the online retailer Amazon.com’s listing of the most popular professional communication textbooks—which I should note updates on an hourly basis. Search terms included “business writing,” “business communication,” “technical writing,” “technical communication,” and “professional writing.” While hundreds of results were returned for these professional communication search terms, I narrowed them based on their edition and publication date (being within the last 5 years prior to the start of this project). Once these textbooks were collected, only those that had specific sections on oral presentations were kept for the study. A final total of 26 textbooks make up this corpus.

In all of these 26 textbooks, the language that each of the writers used for discussing oral presentations in regard to attire and voice was written down (See supplemental appendix). If no mention was made of either element, a note was recorded. Only two fell into this category (Anderson, 2014; Graves & Graves,

Table 1. Breakdown of language regarding attire and voice in 26 professional communication textbooks.

Textbooks	Language about attire in presentations	Language about voice in presentations
26	16	22

2012). The final breakdown of textbooks can be seen in Table 1. As we can see, more textbooks focus on giving students instruction on voice than on attire when giving presentations. In the following section, I provide an analysis of the language on attire and voice found in the oral presentation sections of these textbooks and discuss how it might alienate our trans students who encounter it.

Findings and Discussion

Attire

“Dressing appropriately” for oral presentations is common advice found not only in textbooks but also going back to early publications on presentation literature. In her suggestions for teaching students how to improve their public speaking through oral classroom presentations, Murray (1989), for example, suggests that students “wear business attire for their class presentations” (p. 13). Indeed, Murray recommends that students give practice presentations first in their professional attire before their classroom presentation so that they may feel comfortable in these professional clothes.

In most of the textbooks, students are given a rhetorical explanation of professional dress. That is, they must study their workplace and audience when they present information in order to determine what clothing would best fit the situation. For example, Adler, Elmhorst, and Lucas (2013) warn readers that “dressing effectively doesn’t always mean dressing up. If the occasion calls for casual attire, an overly formal appearance can be just as harmful as being under dressed” (p. 318). Similarly, Gamble and Gamble (2013) mention that students should consider

the topic, the audience, and the occasion. Sometimes speakers make thoughtless errors in dress. For example, one student delivered a very serious tribute to a well-known leader while wearing a shirt emblazoned with a huge Mickey Mouse emblem. (When asked why he wore that shirt, he responded “I didn’t think anyone would notice.”) (p. 378)

Although this example does stress the importance of being attuned to one’s audience, we should consider that the mistake highlighted here is that the speaker did not dress formally enough for his topic. Such a detail somewhat skews the argument that the authors make about the rhetorical dimensions of choosing one’s presentation attire given that students may come away from this example with the message that, to be safe, formal attire is always preferable.

Some textbooks do, in fact, give the simple advice to students that they should “Wear a formal dress [meaning attire in general] and use simple accessories” (Raman & Sharma, 2015, p. 130) or that “Dressing professionally for a presentation will make you look more credible to your audience. You will also feel more confident. If you are not used to professional attire, practice wearing it or you

may appear uncomfortable in formal wear” (Guffey & Loewy, 2015, p. 522), echoing Murray’s (1989) advice. Two texts in this extensive corpus go as far as to make outright gender-based prescriptive statements when it comes to attire. Johnson-Sheehan (2015) states that “A female speaker might wear a blouse and dress pants or a nice skirt. Men might wear a shirt, tie, and dress pants” (p. 599) and Kolin (2014) suggests that “Women should wear a businesslike dress or suit; men should choose a dark suit or sportcoat, white or blue shirt, and a tasteful tie” (p. 401). Advice such as this, though well intentioned, can give students the illusion that all bodies in their class conform to one of these two binaries. When students must give their presentations, they might implicitly expect that everybody in their groups own and dress in such attire, just as Sam’s groupmates did for her. However, for some trans or transitioning students, it may be harder to see themselves as neatly belonging to one of these two categories. As a result, they may attempt to appear more androgynous during this period of their life.

Indeed, this emphasis on professional dress—even when not prescriptive—can leave transgender students feeling frustrated and confused. For example, Gurak and Lannon (2016) emphasize that employees should “Dress for success: Wear clothes that suggest professionalism and confidence” (p. 402), while Camp and Satterwhite (2015) state that “Feeling good about your appearance boosts your self-confidence. How you look and dress expresses your personality just as much as your speech and conduct do” (p. 524). Unlike Kolin (2014) and Johnson-Sheehan (2015), the writers here leave what “professional” means open to interpretation; yet these excerpts are particularly interesting given that for some transgender individuals, feeling “good” or “confident” about one’s appearance might actually conflict with workplace expectations should they not be able to completely engender their gender identity. In addition, given that transgender students might not know what “suitable professional attire” might be for their desired gender (Sager, Gustafson, & Byrd, 2006; Scott, Belke, & Barfield, 2011), this more ambiguous wording may also not be very helpful for transgender students.

Voice

Voice is another area that we should carefully examine as it pertains to professional classroom presentations with regard to transgender individuals—particularly those transitioning from male to female genders.⁴ Budge, Tebbe, and Howard (2010) note that most male to female transgender (MtF) employees have a more difficult time “passing” at work as their preferred gender identity due to their naturally low, masculine voices (p. 383). As Scott et al. (2011) observe, and similar to what Sam had conveyed, despite the investment that MtF individuals might make toward electing hormone therapies and reconstructive surgeries, “some features such as facial hair and tone of voice may be difficult to disguise” (p. 105). Given that MtF employees report being happiest in their personal and professional lives when they are able to pass not only visually

but vocally as their preferred gender identity (McNeill, Wilson, Clark, & Deakin, 2008), MtF individuals may exert a lot of effort manipulating their vocal qualities to sound more feminine. Typically this means changing their pitch of voice in order to produce a higher and more “feminine-sounding” voice, which frequently puts a lot of strain on the speaker’s throat. Speech therapies and voice programs can help transitioning MtFs reduce the chance of vocal stress and strain (Pickering & Kayajian, 2009) but even after such work, listeners may still identify an MtF’s voice as predominantly male—both shortly after speech therapy (Gelfer & Van Dong, 2013) and after extended therapeutic interventions (Gelfer & Tice, 2013). Moreover, while studies have shown that vocal therapies and voice programs can help MtF individuals sound more feminine over time, such work is a lifelong endeavor with successes and regressions along the way (see, e.g., Hancock & Helenius, 2012).

Although most of the textbooks in the corpus I examine rightly assert the importance of volume and pitch, they are discussed in ways that imply the speaker has complete control over these elements or at least has the potential to control them—something which is complicated by discussions of vocal pitch in the transgender speech therapy literature, and to which I will return shortly. Camp and Satterwhite (2015) give one of the more physiologically based descriptions of how students should speak:

If your voice is too soft and you have trouble being heard, practice breathing deeply and controlling your breath with your diaphragm and abdominal muscles, just as a singer does. The large abdominal cavity should be used to store a supply of air that can be released evenly to produce a clear, sustained tone. (p. 525)

Parts of the body are mentioned and their manipulation is described in an almost mechanical way—one stores air in his or her abdominal cavity and the air is released—evenly—when one is ready to speak. At the same time, one must regulate breath not by breathing but through the use of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles. Such precision and control of the body implies a familiarity and comfort with one’s own body—a manipulation of known variables in the production of sound. But it negates the circumstances of those individuals whose bodies betray their intentions—when the sounds that are produced are the body’s but not one’s own. Following this advice occludes, for transgender students, the amount of work that they must also do in order to not just produce sound but to manipulate it to change the sounds naturally produced by their bodies to match who they are.

The authors recommend to students that they vary their pitch to avoid sounding monotone, explaining that:

A speaker’s voice should have a pleasing pitch. Pitch refers the level of a sound on a musical scale. Practice can help correct the shrillness of a voice that is

pitched too high or the excessive resonance of a voice that is pitched too low.
(p. 525)

Indeed, this advice can be found throughout most of the texts in this corpus. That is, a majority of the textbooks encourage students to vary their speech to be more engaging in their presentations (Beebe & Mottet, 2013, p. 305; Gamble & Gamble, 2013, pp. 379–380; Rentz & Lentz, 2015, p. 281). In fact, though they may use discussions of pitch, volume, and tone to make their points (sometimes interchangeably), writers are mostly in agreement that varying one's speaking pattern helps to create an engaging environment for one's audience. For the sake of consistency, I will address those texts that discuss pitch specifically because pitch is an important factor for MtF individuals in their daily personal and professional communication.

Table 2 showcases a few of the suggestions that writers have for students regarding varying their vocal pitch. Similar to professional attire, a few texts stress gender-based prescriptive instructions for men and women regarding voice, although Locker and Kienzlier (2013) do suggest that

Low-pitched voices are usually perceived as being more authoritative, sexier, and more pleasant to listen to than are high-pitched voices . . . Women whose normal speaking voices are high may need to practice projecting their voices to avoid becoming shrill when they speak to large groups. (p. 635)

Table 2. Suggestions in textbooks for students regarding varying their vocal pitch during oral presentations.

-
- Do speak with expression and enthusiasm, sounding natural and interesting, with variety in your pitch. (Munter & Hamilton, 2014, p. 144)*
- A speaker's voice should have a pleasing pitch. Pitch refers the level of a sound on a musical scale. Practice can help correct the shrillness of a voice that is pitched too high or the excessive resonance of a voice that is pitched too low. Another pitch-related problem is the constant pitch that results in monotone speech. An effective speaker varies the pitch of his or her voice to help communicate the message. Intonation, the rising and falling of voice pitch, can indicate that a statement is being made, that a question is being asked or that a speaker is pausing. (Camp & Satterwhite, 2015, p. 525)
- With regard to pitch, try not to fall into the monotone trap. If you maintain one predominant tone throughout your presentation, you will create a sense of boredom in the audience. Use pitch to reflect the emotional content of your material; use it to create interest. (Gamble & Gamble, 2013, pp. 379–380)
- Don't speak in monotone; vary your pitch and inflections so people know you're interested. (Thill & Bovée, 2015, p. 52)
- In an effort to control their voices, many speakers end up flattening their pitch. The resulting monotone is boring and for some listeners, distracting. Try to let the pitch of your voice go up or down as it would in normal conversation. (Markel, 2013, p. 509)
-

As mentioned, an elevated pitch is a strong marker of a female voice, and thus many MtF individuals seek to speak with a higher vocal frequency. However, purposely elevating one's pitch for everyday communication practices complicates the seemingly straightforward manner with which these texts encourage students to vary their pitch because an MtF individual (who is elevating her pitch to have a higher baseline vocal frequency) is already attempting to control various aspect of her speaking pitch, making it more difficult to fluctuate it.

As the literature suggests, a speaking fundamental frequency (F0) is most often perceived to be "feminine" in Western, English-speaking countries if it falls near the range of 196–224 Hz (Davies & Goldberg, 2006).⁵ Given that most men's natural speaking frequencies fall around 100 Hz (Hancock, Colton, & Douglas, 2014), many MtF individuals—particularly those without access to speech therapy interventions and programs—cause laryngeal tension by straining their vocal folds in order to produce a more feminized pitch when they speak. As a result, speech pathologists attempt to help MtF individuals intentionally aim to produce a gender-neutral vocal frequency between 145 and 165 Hz (Gelfer & Schofield, 2000; Spencer, 1988; Wolfe, Ratusnik, Smith, & Northrop, 1990). In addition, researchers have shown that higher F0 frequencies can be obtained through manipulating glottal airflow by closing their vocal folds more quickly while speaking (Gorham-Rowan & Morris, 2006) as well as by modifying the shape of their mouth when phonating (Gunzburger, 1995), which helps to reduce the strain put on the larynx by simply elevating one's pitch.

In reality, asking students to "naturally" vary their pitch as these textbooks do may mentally and physically tax them as they try to determine how best to incorporate a new speaking requirement on top of how they are learning to speak (regardless of whether they are working with a speech therapist or not). That is not to say that teaching students about varying their pitch is unethical or wrong, but such instructions imply that the speaker has a voice that obeys their commands, that they can raise their pitch easily when necessary and still be themselves. For example, a biological male student may raise his pitch from a natural speaking frequency of 115 Hz to 139 Hz without much effort and produce the inflection that is necessary to sound "interested in his topic," as he has been instructed to do. But when an MtF student is already attempting to sound feminine and produces a pitch between 145 and 155 Hz, for example, it may tax her to "naturally" produce a higher frequency and she may hesitate to produce a lower frequency due to being seen as sounding too masculine. Essentially, still practicing to control her voice, an MtF student may not know how to react to, or be able to react to, prescribed guidelines. These directives and guidelines make evident how "In schools, the hidden curriculum of gender regulates bodily comportments, practices, and embodiments, making gendered bodies and their movements appear natural and rigidly dichotomous"—something

which begins in early schooling and continues throughout an adolescent's education (Woolley, 2015, p. 377; see also Martin, 1998).

Implications: Approaching Students' Right to Their Own Gender

Haas (2012) has noted that professional communication has tended to see itself as objective and has thus avoided opportunities to bring up issues of difference. Indeed, there is a long history in professional communication of adhering to practical, objective aims (see Conners, 1982; Miller, 1979; Tebeaux, 1980 for a few examples). But doing so, Haas states, has ignored "the ways in which our work is saturated with white male culture—which has real effects related to privilege and oppression on the lives and work of designers, writers, editors, and audiences" (p. 284). To this, I would add that a persistent thread of cis-privileging instruction persists in our pedagogical tools that we use to teach students about the important work that we do.

I have noted how textbooks' discussions of attire or appearance and voice overlook the experiences of the transgender students in our courses. Emphasizing that dressing formally is important can be a double edged sword since often there may be tacit or even overt gendered forms of dress that textbooks set forth which force trans students to choose between dressing according to their biological sex or their gender identity—a heavy decision for transitioning students. At the same time, simply stating that professional attire should be rhetorical and comfortable, instead of freeing students to choose their own attire, does little to assuage these concerns given the emphasis that is placed on choosing the right clothing. That is, it erases the transgender body and places a safe, nongendered avatar which may work for cisgender individuals (though even then one cannot assume that all cisgendered bodies are standard), but, as I have mentioned, may create ambiguity and anxiety for transgender students uncertain of what "professional dress" means for them. Similarly, textbooks that discuss pitch and inflection during presentations—although a high priority for all presenters—typically eschew the problems that trans individuals face with their voice in daily interactions.

In my own teaching, I have found a way to promote equity on this topic by adapting language from the (not uncontroversial⁶) *Students' Right to Their Own Language* (SRTOL) position statement (Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Language Policy, 1974), adopted by our colleagues in the field of composition. The SRTOL resolution states, in part, that teachers of writing should acknowledge the diverse dialects that (primarily elementary, high school, and first-year college) students bring with them into the writing classroom. It affirms that teachers must "respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language" (p. 2). Not much has been written in

professional communication fields regarding SRTOL, possibly because such concerns diverge from those in PTC contexts. While instructors of professional communication courses may not wish to rob students of their dialects, as our focus is on professional workplace practices we must teach students about professional standards of English, or at least common language usages, so that our students may be effective communicators in professional settings where acceptance of these practices is expected.

At the same time, even if we may not agree with the implications of SRTOL, I have found it useful to think about the intentions behind the policy and utilize them in ways that can be more inclusive toward trans students, though other students benefit from this approach as well. With the idea of Students' Rights to Their Own Gender, I focus on interrogating the language presented in the textbooks (p. 10), comparing those lessons to actual real-life expectations (p. 10), and having students focus less on the superficial elements of their presentation and more on being able to explain the content of what they want to say (p. 8). When we interrogate the language of textbooks (with regard to oral presentations), I ask students to think about who is being privileged when they are being asked to "dress professionally." The answer they give is typically never "trans students" but "those who can afford to." I do also then circle back to trans students and bring up Sam's experience in my class—albeit briefly—to help illustrate how if we are not careful, we may be sending implicit messages to trans individuals that their bodies do not fit. The same is true for discussing issues of voice. I ask students to think about how they would respond as supervisors if one of their employees were to have a difficult time speaking "clearly" (for a variety of reasons) in any of the ways that textbooks suggest. Answers range, and there never seems to be consensus, but the importance here is that we raise the point because it allows students to understand how there may be other forces beyond a speaker's control that might not allow them to perform the way that textbooks describe. My hope is that raising these points not only lets trans students feel more accepting of their bodies, however they may view them, but also encourages their cisgender peers to see that guidelines can be shaped to meet the needs of an organizations' people. As the SRTOL statement notes, "today's students will be tomorrow's employers" (p. 14), meaning that we should foster a spirit of inclusiveness in students within our own classrooms with the hope that they promote equitable practices in their careers. Given that, as we have seen, trans individuals encounter a plethora of problematic genres in the workplace, this could be a place for tomorrow's employers to take note and create change. This emphasis on inclusion, of course, does not detract from the presentations themselves; students must still be able to convey their knowledge in a way that an audience will be able to understand, though we collaboratively negotiate as a class on what it means to dress professionally or speak clearly and engagingly.

That said, the ways that I have attempted to create more inclusive spaces may not be sufficient or even appropriate in every institution. Instructors can consider implementing several interventions in their classes to make their learning spaces more equitable. We can ask writers and publishers of textbooks to include information that speaks to the diversity of human bodies and how they may not necessarily fit within the boundaries that are most commonly presented. This is not much of a deviation from the lessons already found in most textbooks as many of them make space to discuss how students should cover up their tattoos or limit their jewelry (especially men) during interviews (Alred, Brusaw, & Oliu, 2015; Locker & Kienzler, 2013; Oliu, Brusaw, & Alred, 2013; Searles, 2017). “If you have been tattooed,” Searles (2017) writes, “do your best to cover your ink. Just as the physical appearance of your letter and resume influences whether you’re invited to an interview, your own appearance influences whether you get hired” (p. 141). Students are also advised by some texts to be upfront with their employers about their body art and ask if such an aspect would clash with workplace culture. Already some of these texts describe the body as an object that may not necessarily fit in with some imagined idealized standards.

However, although advocating for such changes could be useful, we should remember Colton and Holmes’ argument that we should look for opportunities within our own control to act out opportunities for inclusivity and social justice now. Hence, as I have mentioned, we can adjust professional presentation guidelines in our own classes to be more inclusive of students regardless of their gender identity by making not only making important judgment calls on how to ask students to dress during presentations but by infusing our instruction with topics that get students to consider these aspects the professional lives of trans students.

In addition, we must recognize that no one approach will meet the needs of all transgender students given that there is such diversity in what it means to be trans. Indeed, one reason trans researchers find it difficult to study phenomena pertinent to trans individuals is because there are a plethora of lived experiences that can fall within this amorphous category of being trans (Labuski & Keo-Meier, 2015, p. 19). As a result, there may be genderqueer students who may not feel comfortable conforming to any binary-based dress code while other trans students, like Sam, may deeply desire to align with their specific gender identity, complete with socially accepted norms expected of that gender, but do not have the resources to appropriately represent their gender identity. Still, other trans students who feel comfortable with their gender identity might actually want more prescriptive guidelines on how to professionally dress as their gender identity. Regardless, this should remind us that “there is no ‘one size fits all’ model for supporting trans inclusion and agency, and sometimes those we seek to support may be discouraged, silenced, or marginalized by our attempts at inclusion” (Catalano, 2015, p. 425). This is why social justice is context-bound, without universally applicable rules for engaging with marginalized

groups (McKenzie et al., 2008, p. 114) and why it is a continual examination and reexamination of one's positionality and policies. My point is that we should continue to adapt, be flexible, and listen to our student populations so that we may move and model our teaching closer toward inclusivity.

Future Research

In this article, I have noted how the tools that we use to teach professional presentations may conflict with the lived experiences of our transgender students. By stressing dress norms unquestioningly and, conversely, vaguely, trans students may find it difficult to know what is expected of them not only in their coursework but also for embarking on professional careers. In addition, presenting a binary and gendered set of guidelines on voice may also frustrate trans students by making it difficult to determine how to best present information. I hope that this will serve as a starting point to continue researching this topic.

Future studies should examine the guidelines that instructors of professional communication courses provide to students regarding professional attire and vocal elements for presentation, and how such instruction impacts transgender students or speaks to larger gender norms in professional settings more generally. While textbooks carry significant weight in terms of shaping students' impressions of professional communication, instructors also have a large influence over how students perceive aspects of these courses. Importantly, we have the ability to clarify or even override instructions that students may learn from textbooks, given that we are the evaluators of student performance. If instructors add more depth and complexity to the discussion of nongender-binary expectations in the classroom as well as in the workplace, it will go a long way toward helping transgender students to not be placed in these kinds of situations regarding oral presentation assignments. If, however, instructors do not make any clarifications regarding voice and attire, students may fall back on problematic textbook guidelines. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine how instructors broach the requirements of their assignment.

At the same time, we should examine what biases students who enter our professional communication courses bring into our classrooms. This could take the form of surveying students across a plethora of business, technical, and professional writing and communication courses to collect information on how they view what dressing and sounding "professional" means to them. If students feel that following strict gendered guidelines for group oral presentations may help them obtain a higher grade despite the instruction they have received, they may eschew those guidelines and fall back on their own beliefs about professional dress. Gaining a better insight into these thoughts may help instructors understand how to best discuss this topic for the benefit of both trans and cisgender students. This information could be paired up with data on how

instructors approach the issue of professional presentations. Do instructors follow textbook instructions on professional attire and voice or do they deviate, and if so, why and in what ways? Such insight would give us a better understanding to begin opening up discussions on the problematic nature of binary workplace norms.

More helpful would be to open this conversation to trans voices. Ideally, we could study how imposing these presentation guidelines impact transgender students and how they manage their presentations in spite of any instructions which put them in situations where they feel that they must make their bodies conform to norms that don't fit who they are. Again, because instructors have ultimate control of assigning and assessing presentations, it may be that such emphasis on professional attire and voice may be eschewed in the classroom despite their prominent place in the textbooks I reviewed. Surveys could be helpful, but given the low number of transgender students or how many may choose to publicly identify as trans, small, qualitative research may be more appropriate to uncover these pieces of information. That said, I emphasize here that working with transgender research participants—in any capacity—should be done in an ethical and thoughtful way, to ensure they do not feel as though they must participate if they are not comfortable disclosing their gender identity or the socioacademic difficulties that they have experienced because of academic structures in place.

On a larger scale, we also need to be more embedded in cultures that might not be immediately visible to us. There may be students who are othered in different ways and may not feel like they can or should discuss how their identity and background interact with what we teach. We must proactively consider cultural factors (in the broadest sense)—particularly now, when campuses have seen a rise in hate speech against minority students and groups (CBS News, 2017; Flanagan, 2017; Natanson & Xiao, 2017; Taylor, 2017). The question at this point is how professional communication instructors can use the power we have to make a difference for students like Sam in our own classrooms. That is, we must consider the messages that we put out to students like Sam, who enter our classrooms to learn how to communicate professionally.

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Notes

1. I use the pronoun “they” here only to show that because Sam dressed androgynously, I had no indication of her gender at the time.
2. Cox (2019) is a notable exception, published after this analysis was conducted.
3. Indeed, in their assessment of legal needs of the trans community, Minter and Daley (2003) found that in San Francisco—historically seen as a vanguard of LGBT rights—49% of transgender respondents reported that they had experienced some form of discrimination in their workplace—the highest percentage of any “area” that the researchers asked about (compared with 38% in Public Accommodations or 32% in Housing, for example).
4. Although the points I make in this section may also apply to other transgender individuals, I must limit my discussion to MtFs because, lamentably, as Davies and Goldberg (2006) point out, most of the research in speech therapy and trans studies has studied primarily MtF individuals (p. 188).
5. Gorham-Rowan and Morris (2006) suggests a pitch of at least 180 Hz (p. 258).
6. See Berthoff and Clark (1975), Smith (1976), Zorn (2010).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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