

Changing Names in the Classroom - Yay or Nay?

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When studying in English, some students opt to change their given name to an “English” name in the classroom. They may introduce themselves to the teacher and classmates as “ABC, but you can call me XYZ”. Often, our given name is chosen because it means something significant to the family. So, for people who grow up and choose to use an “English” name in the English classroom, how might that affect their identity? Is it okay to “press pause” on it because the given name is “difficult to pronounce”? On the one hand, a name may not define a person’s identity. On the other hand, a name change may alter how the person is perceived by others and perhaps even how they see themselves.

At increasingly culturally- and linguistically-diverse college campuses in Ontario, some international students go by their English name. With students who speak dozens of languages and come from dozens of cultures around the world, I have long struggled with the implications of English language name use in the classroom. In this seminar-style lecture, we will explore the topic to come to a functional conclusion as to what some “best practices” may be when it comes to recognizing all our students’ diverse backgrounds and helping them feel included in the classroom – regardless of what name they use.

Gabrielle Berube teaches Communications at Algonquin College. She first started thinking about the issue of using target-language names in her high school German class. Since then, she has mulled over this question in numerous language classes both as a student and as a teacher. Gabrielle is passionate about teaching and recognizing the linguistic and cultural identities of all of her students.