Liberal Education BLOG

Want to Create a Welcoming Classroom Community? Say Your Student's Name (Correctly)

Oct 22, 2021 | Kristine Bartanen

In her poem "Say My Name," Meleika Gesa-Fatafehi provides a powerful assertion about the importance of her name: "Say it right or don't say it at all."

The poem was [featured recently](#) on one of my favorite podcasts, "Poetry Unbound." In his introduction to the episode, host Pádraig Ó Tuama reflects on the poem's declaration that a name is a powerful representation of heritage and place and "needs to be taken on its own terms, and not translated into any name that sounds like it's from somewhere else."

Over the past couple of years, several prominent leaders, including Vice President Kamala Harris and US Representative Pramila Jayapal, have [faced the regular mispronouncing](#) of their names. Jayapal says that such mispronunciations can be intentional and used to "otherize" the person and make them feel as if they don't belong. When one of her House colleagues mispronounced her name, Jayapal echoed Gesa-Fatafehi in requesting, "If you're going to say my name, please say it right."

Earlier this year, author Beth Nguyen shared a [detailed narrative](#) in the *New Yorker* entitled "America Ruined My Name for Me . . . So I Chose a New One." Reflecting on her Vietnamese name, she observed, "My earliest memories of school include the tension of the roll call, when I would try to volunteer my name to stop the teacher from attempting a pronunciation. The kindest teachers were the ones who asked me directly how to say my name—in classes of almost all white kids, it wasn't difficult to figure out who would be named Bich."

These narratives prompted me to recall a former first-year student who shared with me that, in two out of four classes, teachers used stereotypical Latinx first names to call on him rather than his own name. I have remembered, too, a senior who emotionally acknowledged that—following a year away on a study abroad program—she returned to campus with a plan to reclaim her full name. She said that she had long felt shame at its difference and pronunciation difficulty for peers. However, her time away had helped her to see the importance of her name to her identity and to find renewed pride in its distinctive beauty. I thought, too, of how much work often goes into accurate name

pronunciation for commencement ceremonies . . . and the opportunities lost when the same attention isn't given to students' names at their matriculation.

Learning students' names at the outset of a course is difficult for many instructors, younger and elder alike. The communication anxiety that accompanies the first day of each new course does not help, and new technologies and COVID-19 safety measures (such as face masks and distancing) only add to the challenge.

That said, it's the responsibility of teachers and faculty members to be especially attentive to building a welcoming community among their students. Opening a class by announcing, "I apologize in advance if I mispronounce your name," is a sign of not trying hard enough. Asking students to say their preferred names, either in-person or through a learning management system, and then learning to use their names often and accurately are important means for bolstering students' sense of belonging, confidence in their field of study, and persistence to academic success. Say it right!

Kristine Bartanen is professor emerita of communication studies at the University of Puget Sound.

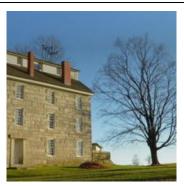*Have an idea for a blog post? Write to dedman@aacu.org.*

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