

## Gender Representation in eLearning (Oct 15)



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“It may feel like a field of landmines, to tackle this or any diversity issue, but it is well established that humans connect with representations that are like them, and therefore, good gender representation is essential to authentic eLearning.”

One of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s most famous quotes is a response to the question, “When will there be enough women on the Supreme Court?” Her answer is, “When there are nine.” It sounds facetious, but the Notorious RBG is actually perfectly serious. She explains that people are often shocked at that response, “But there’d been nine men, and nobody’s ever raised a question about that.”

The issue of how to represent gender in a way that is authentic and helpful—in eLearning and all other situations—is not an easy one. Nor is it, in fact, just one issue. How many women are portrayed as opposed to men, what the roles and characteristics of those genders are, whether transgender, agender, or gender-fluid individuals are portrayed at all (and how)—all of these can have a profound impact on the authenticity of the learning experience and what kind of message the final product sends about the organization’s values and culture. And unfortunately, the answers are not as simple as “Always portray X percent of the characters as women” or “Always show women on the correct side of the issue.” However, hopefully the following considerations provide good fodder for conversation, within our industry and within your department.

### **Portrayals of women by percentage**

If you had an immediate, negative gut reaction to picturing an all-female United States Supreme Court you are far from alone. Many studies have shown that not only does pretty much everyone overestimate how much space women and girls take up, we tend to resent it, responding as if females are taking up more than their fair share, or as if the space in question is becoming over-feminized.

For example, studies of boys and girls in classrooms show overwhelmingly that boys get more talk time than girls, and for whatever reason, male and female teachers alike tend to judge inaccurately when girls have talked in equal amounts to boys. One study of this phenomenon identified a teacher who had created an atmosphere in which male and female students were actually sharing equally in talk time by gender, but even this teacher estimated that the girls were speaking an astonishing 90 percent of the time, rather than the actual 50 percent; his male students also complained that the girls were talking more than their fair share.

Another study, commissioned by the Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media, has found that crowd scenes in movies tend to be comprised of only 17 percent women. As Davis explains, “What we’re in effect doing is training children to see that women and girls are less important than men and boys. We’re training them to perceive that women take up only 17 percent of the space in the world.” And it follows that in a society in which everyone has been trained to expect only 17 percent of the space to be taken up by women, women in the actual world, who comprise about 50 percent of the population, will be expected to somehow shrink into that much smaller percentage.

One ill effect of this is that it becomes increasingly difficult to even notice situations like [the one that inspired this series](#), wherein only one of a dozen recorded conference sessions was presented by a female ... and, therefore, only one female in a dozen people achieved the prominence that is gained by having her presentation documented and shared far beyond the conference. Another ill effect is that even when situations like these are noticed, they are more difficult to argue against. Both of these effects can lead to very real loss of opportunity for women.

Translate that situation to your organization, and consider that almost all organizations are trying to improve their cultures with respect to diversity, and it becomes clear that eLearning must reflect a more realistic and even aspirational vision of women’s prominence. Having a token female in your eLearning scenarios is not enough, and there isn’t even a compelling reason to limit women’s representation to 50 percent. After all, if an all-female United States Supreme Court is considered a serious proposition by one of the greatest minds in the country, why could your next eLearning scenario not portray an all-female IT department?

### **The characteristics of how women are portrayed**

Portraying a greater percentage of women in your eLearning, though, is not the whole story of authentic gender representation. It’s also worth asking some tough questions about *how* women are portrayed. Hopefully it is obvious in 2015 why it’s inappropriate and unhelpful to portray women in only subservient or supporting roles, or as always needing help, while men are in positions of authority and/or providing expertise. What may be less obvious, however, is that the reverse is also true.

For decades, TV advertising and sitcoms have portrayed white, straight men as hapless and/or helpless, while the women around them take up the slack in work or at home—or at least, the women know more about the benefits of new products than men do, for the span of a 30-second commercial. What’s problematic about these portrayals is that they set up the expectation that women will actually take on these “Wonder Woman” roles at work—and, in fact, must do so in order to succeed. In contrast, portraying women as complex human beings who are able to mess up sometimes, and learn, and still have a job—just like men do—is an essential part of gender equality.

So what to do in your eLearning? If you feel like your writing will reveal biases one way or another (and it probably will), remove gender from the design of your characters altogether. Write complex, fallible characters in authentic situations, name them only with an initial, and then once the storyboards are complete, use a random name generator to decide which ones are male and which ones are female. And if any of the characters seem not believable as a male or as a female, consider whether you are allowing both males and females to express a realistic spectrum of characteristics—or whether you are just following (and therefore reinforcing) traditional gender stereotypes.

Finally, in addition to the roles and positions that your female characters occupy, consider how they interact with other characters. Learn about the [Bechdel-Wallace test](#) and apply it as a very basic measure of whether the female characters in scenarios are acting with agency independent of a man’s authority, and then feel free to build upon it and create even higher standards for your organization.

## Portrayals of other genders

A complete examination of gender representation cannot be limited to only men and women, though. As with any minority, transgender, agender, or gender-fluid individuals benefit from visibility—and your organization will benefit from gaining cultural understanding. However, visibility can be a tricky issue, as making a *point* of a character in eLearning being other than cisgender would most likely send the exact opposite message you would want.

Here are some ways to introduce characters who are beyond the gender binary in authentic and appropriate ways:

- Include characters who use gender-neutral pronouns (they/them/their, zhe/zhim/sher)
- When the training covers domains that may involve particular issues faced by these populations, include them. For example, training on HR software may include how to change an employee's name and gender.
- When it comes to visuals, recognize that you can't necessarily tell whether someone is transgender, agender, or gender-fluid based on appearance, and stock images have had many of the problems pointed out by Trina Rimmer in this same publication [a few weeks ago](#).

For further guidance, refer to GLAAD's [Media Reference Guide—Transgender Issues](#) and [Tips for Allies of Transgender People](#).

## Conclusion

A young Ruth Bader Ginsberg saw a United States Supreme Court that was purely white and male, but the court sitting today is more representative of—and more encouraging to—the people over which it presides. And luckily, changing our habits in representing gender in eLearning is not nearly as difficult as changing the makeup of the Supreme Court. Tackling this or any diversity issue may feel like you're entering a field of landmines, but it is well established that humans connect with representations that are like them, and therefore, good gender representation is essential to authentic eLearning.

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