

SPEAKING OF TEACHING

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Gender Issues in Teaching:

Does Nurturing Academic Success in Women Mean Rethinking Some of What We Do in the Classroom?

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CASE 1: *A student starts her reading for her class and discovers that the hand-drawn pictures in the textbook, all of people in street scenes, always represent the women wearing only bikinis or even nothing. The men in the same pictures are in business suits or casual dress. There are no pictures of nude men in the book. The professor for the class never mentions the pictures in the textbook or makes any comments that show that he finds them to be inappropriate. Many women in the class feel uncomfortable with the text.*

CASE 2: *In a science lab, two co-workers, one male and the other female, disagree on how best to pursue the next set of experiments. The male student accuses the woman student, who has an independent opinion on the way the experiments should be done, of being "dominating," "hysterical," and of "asking too many questions." The students' advisor, after listening to the complaints, agrees that the female student has acted "hysterically" and he gives the male student control over the project.*

CASE 3: *Female students in a section in a large introductory class complain that their male TA touches them when he talks to them, is overly friendly (in a non-professional way) and has repeatedly invited women students to the coffeehouse to talk about their questions, but has never asked a male student to continue their discussion at the coffeehouse. The female students feel uncomfortable and feel that the TA is not respecting their personal space.*

Could this ever happen at Stanford? Yes. All three of these cases are real, and all three took place at Stanford within the last two years. Many women at Stanford, as at every other coeducational college or university, still face both egregious and subtle sexism. Even those who escape the most blatant forms of sexism often find themselves feeling disempowered in the classroom and less sure of themselves in college than they were in high school. Some research suggests that women's self-esteem declines during their college years, and that women who attend coeducational institutions have lower self-esteem and less academic confidence than women who attend single-sex schools. That low self-esteem starts in the classroom where a student's involvement in class relates to her self-concept.¹

The Final Report of the Women's Needs Assessment Study Group, issued in the autumn of 1992, makes it clear that problems for women in the classroom exist at Stanford. The Women's Needs Assessment (WNA) was a study begun in the fall of 1989 to examine the status of women students on the Stanford campus. Stanford undergraduate women reported that they are less assertive than men in the classroom and that they often feel unable to fit into the existing academic model, which is male-centered. Furthermore, they felt they were taken less seriously than male students and many reported that professors made sexist comments in class.

Women reported feeling "demeaned, disgusted, stupid, self-conscious, overpowered, ignored, minimized, trivialized and marginalized" in the academic environment. They said they felt more comfortable with female professors than with male and believed that male "students receive more encouragement and

¹ Myra and David Sadker, "Sexism in the Classroom: From Grade School to Graduate School," *Phi Delta Kappan* (March 1986), p. 514; Cornelius Riordan, "Single and Mixed-Gender Colleges for Women: Educational, Attitudinal and Occupational Outcomes," *The Review of Higher Learning* (Spring 1992): 327-346.

credit for their comments—even when these comments echo a point made previously by a woman.” Women students also felt that TAs in particular needed to be more sensitive to their own teaching styles, which now usually take the form of a competitive verbal debate. The report recommended that the University implement training for faculty and teaching assistants to enhance sensitivity to issues of sexism in the classroom.

This problem is not unique to Stanford or particular to the college experience. The existence of gender bias in elementary and secondary school classrooms has been well-documented. Girls at lower educational levels receive less attention than boys and less praise from their teachers. This discrepancy does not disappear at the college level. Studies show that women students receive even less attention from college professors of *either sex* than they received from their teachers in secondary education. Furthermore, the classroom responses of college women are even more likely simply to be accepted without comment or praise by professors than are girls’ comments at lower academic levels. While some argue that these kinds of gender differences should be screened out by the rigorous admission standards of a place like Stanford, women students get short shrift at even the most elite colleges. As a study at Harvard showed, a stringent admissions process does not even out the differences between men’s and women’s styles in the classroom, and it does not ensure that women will successfully compete in the classroom.²

A better understanding of how gender dynamics operate in the classroom is crucial to women’s academic success. This kind of awareness is especially important for teaching assistants, who often have more contact with students directly than professors do (especially in the sophomore and junior years). Most students find that the majority of their discussion sections are led by TAs, and TAs are usually the main access point in fields where women are traditionally underrepresented (like the sciences or engineering). Furthermore, some studies have found that TAs can be the source of the most negative interactions for undergraduates. A study of women undergrads in physics found that many women students were treated by TAs as potential dates or treated as if they didn’t belong in physics. No matter what a department might do to recruit or retain undergraduate female majors, if TAs are not trained and given proper guidelines, any progress can be nullified.³

These issues should not be ignored: studies show that college is an important developmental time for students and that it has a great impact on them in their further schooling or professions. When women feel disempowered in the classroom, they are less likely to speak up or to be active learners, or to seek help outside of class. If women students are not getting an equal chance to excel in the college classroom and if they are

not nurtured, they may switch classes, majors and even careers. The chilly classroom climate affects many women’s self-esteem and thus will affect them for their entire college career, and perhaps into their professional life.

Teaching assistants and faculty members should explore how gender dynamics affect their classroom, and be willing to change behaviors or patterns that affect women negatively. Dealing with gender in the classroom, like dealing with any other kind of difference (race, ethnicity, learning styles), demands that the instructor accept responsibility for creating an effective learning environment for all of his or her students.

How the Classroom Climate Can Be Inherently Chilly for Women

Professors and teaching assistants sometimes feel that their women students are passive in the classroom, and indeed, women do sometimes act that way. Women often do not participate in class as much as men and they may make their points less forcefully. Women students may in fact invite interruptions or inattention by speaking hesitantly or beginning comments with phrases like, “this isn’t really important, but . . .” How can we as instructors deal with and change this behavior?

Many studies have shown that women and men tend to have different learning styles and different patterns of communication. The issue is not whether the male style is bad and the female style is good, or whether every male acts differently from every single female. Most teachers have taught articulate and assertive female students. But men and women tend to have different styles. Even though both are equally valid, the male style usually dominates in the classroom. As a result, women may not get as much out of their discussion sections as men do.

Most teachers feel that active participation in class encourages learning and helps students master the vocabulary and thought process of a discipline. Pedagogically, students will get more out of a class when they engage in the discussion and become participants rather than passive observers. The fact that men and women are often unequal participants and that the difference is based primarily on gender means that women are in some ways being denied equal access, both to the conversational space and into the general discipline.

Deborah Tannen, who has studied the different communication and speaking patterns of males and females, finds that male and female patterns of speaking have “stunning implications for classroom interaction.”⁴ There are several key areas of difference between men and women students, including their reasons for speaking and their ways of thinking, their speaking styles, and their belief in their own abilities. While these areas

² Catherine Krupnick, “Women and Men in the Classroom: Inequality and Its Remedies,” *On Teaching and Learning: The Journal of the Harvard-Danforth Center* (May 1985): 19-25.

³ Mary Fehrs and Roman Czujko, “Women in Physics: Reversing the Exclusion,” *Physics Today* (August 1992), p. 36.

⁴ Deborah Tannen, “Teachers’ Classroom Strategies Should Recognize that Men and Women Use Language Differently,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 19, 1991).

Most faculty members assume that participating in class discussion is a necessary part of successful performance. Yet speaking in a classroom is more congenial to boys' language experience than to girls', since it entails putting oneself forward in front of a large group of people, many of whom are strangers and at least one of whom is sure to judge speakers' knowledge and intelligence by their verbal display. Another aspect of many classrooms that makes them more hospitable to most men than to most women is the use of debate-like formats as a learning tool. Our educational system . . . is fundamentally male in that the pursuit of knowledge is believed to be achieved by ritual opposition: public display followed by argument and challenge. . . . But ritual opposition is antithetical to the way most females learn and like to interact. It is not that females don't fight, but that they don't fight for fun. They don't ritualize opposition.

—Deborah Tannen

obviously represent general patterns that do not apply neatly to all men and women, they nevertheless provide a foundation for an understanding of the general gender dynamics taking place in many classrooms.

Men and women talk for different reasons, as Deborah Tannen has shown. Men tend to talk to establish status and hierarchies and to pass on information. Women talk in order to be connected to others, to build networks, and to share experiences. Men are more likely to feel comfortable speaking in a public setting—which involves status and being judged—than women are. Women often like talking in groups and working together to solve problems. These ways of speaking to some extent mirror different ways of thinking. While women tend to collect and appreciate other's ideas, men tend to debate and evaluate each other's ideas. Thus, men are far more likely to be comfortable with the traditional classroom atmosphere, which is built on the model of public speaking with an emphasis on debate and judging the relative worth of ideas.

Women, furthermore, have been socialized to shy away from public debates and to present their own views indirectly. Women are less likely than men to state their opinions outright or to feel confident in expressing their views. Many women have, in fact, been taught that it is rude and demanding to put one's

own ideas forward forcefully. This affects how students speak in the classroom. While a male student might say in class, "It's clear that the author is biased," a woman student is more likely to say, "This probably isn't important, but it seemed to me, that maybe the author was biased," or "The author seems like he might be biased, don't you think?" Women students may use excessive qualifiers or make statements with a questioning intonation. As Deborah Tannen notes, "many men are more comfortable than most women in using talk to claim attention."

Finally, women's hesitancy in the classroom is often mirrored by a tendency to doubt their own abilities and skills. Women are more likely than men to attribute their success to luck or hard work rather than to skill. Some studies suggest that women students in fact need more feedback and encouragement than male students in a similar position. Women students often require higher grades to persist in a field than men do (i.e., a woman who gets a "B-" in Intro Econ is less likely to continue on to Econ 2 than a male student with the same grade.) Furthermore, women who are not as successful as they had hoped to be are more likely to blame themselves for their failure to achieve than male students are. As one professor has noted, "[Self confidence and the need for encouragement and advice] is the primary area in which male and female students differ quite a bit I had women students who were very bright and who didn't perceive of themselves as such. Whereas I had men students who were of moderate capabilities and convinced that their brilliance was going unrecognized."⁵

How these Patterns Affect College Classrooms

- First, and perhaps most importantly, even though men and women have different speaking styles, it is often the women who make more adjustments when participating in mixed groups. Mixed-group discussions follow the style of the men alone. "Male-female conversations are more like men's conversations than they are like women's. So when women and men talk to each other, both make adjustments, but the women make more. Women are at a disadvantage in mixed-sex groups, because they have had less practice in conducting conversation the way it is being conducted in these groups."⁶ In bringing men and women together in the classroom, it is women who are asked to compromise and change their styles. Men are rarely asked to participate in an atmosphere where they might feel less than comfortable.

- Second, male students, who like to evaluate and debate ideas, are more likely to feel comfortable attacking readings and ideas, which is often the main activity of a discussion section. Men tend to avoid personal

⁵ Roberta Hall, "The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?" (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1982), p. 4.

⁶ Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), p. 237.

anecdotes or relating their personal experience to their academic learning. Women, however, are more likely to resist discussion they perceive as hostile. Many like to use personal anecdotes to relate their learning to their own lives. Women therefore often feel far more uncomfortable than men in public debate and public challenge and many are alienated in the classroom simply because of the discussion style.

- Third, men usually dominate classroom situations, especially when the instructor is a male and there are more men than women students. Men hold the floor longer than women and shape the agenda of the discussion.

- Fourth, women are much more likely than men to be interrupted. Male students usually hold the floor until they are finished with their comment; women students are frequently interrupted and only have the floor for short outbursts. Talk in classes often goes in gender cycles—men will hold the floor for a long period of time while each makes a complete comment, and then women will get the floor for a much shorter time and their comments will be short and overlapping. Women need more access to the floor so they have more time to make and complete their comments and so they are not competing with each other “for the scarce resource of conversational space.” Once interrupted, women often do not attempt to speak again. Thus, women students are far more likely than men to be only onetime contributors.

- Fifth, while women’s comments may be just as valid as men’s, they are easier for the instructor to discount or ignore, since they are often phrased in a hesitant manner. Instructors may subconsciously favor those who state their opinions more directly.

What Can Instructors Do?

Obviously, instructors should be sure always to avoid the egregious behaviors that contribute most directly to creating a chilly climate for women in the classroom. But dealing with gender in the classroom in a larger sense relates to a basic question of fairness and of good teaching—how to recognize that different students have different styles and how to adopt teaching methods that are inclusive rather than exclusive. Instructors need to accept women’s ways of knowing as a difference to be responded to, not as a deficit to be remedied.

I. Be Aware

The first thing that instructors must do before they can make any changes in their classrooms is to be aware of what is actually happening in their classrooms. Many of the behaviors that favor men are subtle and subconscious. Do you use the same tone of voice with your female and your male students; do you make eye contact with the men more than the women in your classes; do the women in your classes underparticipate; are they often interrupted by others; who speaks and how often in your class?

What are the best ways to find out what is happening in your classroom? Here are several suggestions:

- 1) Keep a log of which students speak and for how long. Watch for patterns over several weeks. Try to identify the dominant and subordinate groups in your classroom.

- 2) Have your class videotaped. Watch the tape and listen to your intonation and your comments. Do you react differently to male and female students? Do you look at men more often than women? Are you more likely to call on a man than a woman? Look at the list of behaviors that create a chilly climate for women and mark off those where you could use improvement. CTL will videotape your sections for free.

- 3) Have an outside observer come to your class and ask them to pay particular attention to patterns of participation and interruption.

- 4) Ask your students how they feel about the classroom atmosphere, or have a CTL Teaching Consultant do a small group evaluation in your class.

II. Improving the Classroom Climate

Once you have identified any problem areas, you can try some strategies to improve the classroom atmosphere. Here are some basic tips:

- 1) Establish an open classroom atmosphere and clear guidelines for classroom behavior early in the quarter. You can begin simply by telling the students that you expect them all to participate and that you expect them all to be respectful of each other. If interruptions occur, stop them early in the quarter. Make a practice of encouraging students who have not participated to talk, either by asking to hear other voices or by calling on them in a non-confrontational manner. Make it clear that you value student comments and that you value any student question.

- 2) Watch for cues that may indicate a student wants to speak—leaning forward or making eye contact with you. Help those students who do want to participate to feel comfortable in doing so.

- 3) Increase your wait time after you ask a question. Don’t always call on the first person who puts a hand up. You increase the chance that a less vocal student will answer the question if you wait longer before answering the question yourself or calling on frequent classroom speakers.

- 4) Try to judge students’ comments on content, not style. If a woman makes a good comment, but expresses it in a hesitant or questioning way, be sure to validate the comment and to make sure the class takes it seriously.

- 5) Be responsive to all students who make comments; praise both men and women for their contributions. Call on your students by name when they make a comment, and mention comments again if they are pertinent (e.g., “I want us to go back and respond to Alice’s comment, because it raised some very interesting points . . .”)

- 6) Provide women students with positive feedback about their work. Female undergraduates need more reassurance and stronger cues about their ability to

succeed than male students do, particularly in areas where they might feel uncertain, like math and sciences. Women students have a special need for a supportive climate that affirms their ability to succeed.

III. Alternative Teaching Methods —Rethinking Your Classroom

What is your model of a good class? All of us are influenced, both consciously and unconsciously, by our own feelings about what our favorite type of class is and what our own learning styles are. For example, instructors often equate nonstop discussion with a good class. That means, however, that we sometimes rely very heavily on contributions from the first students to volunteer, who are usually the most assertive students with the quickest response time. Participation is then based on quick thinking rather than thinking carefully or in depth about an idea. Furthermore, if a few students monopolize the discussion early, they will almost always dominate for the rest of the section too. Thus, from the beginning, the instructor has accepted a dynamic where a few students do most of the talking and the majority can get by without engaging with the material. By recognizing our own preconceptions of what we consider to be a good class, we can begin to see the limitations of these models, and we can also begin to experiment with other models and ideas. Here are a few possibilities:

1) Vary your classroom format by including more small group activities. Working in small groups allows students to develop connections with each other and can transform the role of the instructor by sharing leadership with students.

2) Use a collaborative rather than a competitive model in your classroom. Make knowledge something that the class will achieve by working together and sharing ideas. In a math class this might mean having students work on problems together or having them each explain how to do a different problem to each other. In a humanities class there are a wide variety of collaborative projects that could be designed to get students to work together and to pool their knowledge and skills.

3) Rotate leadership in the class. Make each student responsible for leading discussion for a week, or for preparing a handout to explain in class. This ensures that all students will have to participate at some point and gives them the advantage of feeling like an “expert” on that week’s material.

4) Change the course content if possible or necessary to be more aware of women’s issues. Allow a great deal of freedom for students to choose paper or project topics that interest them.

These are only a few of the many ways that an instructor or a TA can begin to make the classroom atmosphere a welcome one for both men and women students.



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