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Gender Issues in the College Classroom

The gender gap isn't confined to politics. It's especially noticeable at public universities, where female students now substantially outnumber males. Nationwide, women now constitute 57 percent of college students.

Yet even though women now receive significantly more B.A.s than men, they have not achieved equality in the classroom. Today's college classrooms still contain subtle, and not so subtle, gender biases.

Gender Inequalities in the College Classroom

A large body of research shows that instructors:

--Call on male students more frequently than female students.

--Are more likely to use male students' names when calling upon students and in attributing ideas advanced in discussion.

--Ask male students more abstract questions and female students more factual questions.

--Are less likely to elaborate upon points made by female students.

This research has demonstrated that:

--Male students speak more frequently and longer in class discussions.

--Male students are more likely to blurt out answers without raising their hands or being recognized by the instructor

Not only are female students less likely to take part in class discussions, but when they do, these students are more likely to

- Be interrupted before they complete their response (sometimes by other female students).
- Make their statements less loudly and at less length.
- Express their ideas in a more hesitant, tentative, indirect, less assertive, or more polite manner.
Examples include phrasing a statement as a question or appending such phrases as "I guess" or "Don't you think" or "I may be wrong."

Although males tend to dominate classroom discussion, this, of course, does not mean that all males speak up. Talkativeness among students varies widely among individuals. Some talk a lot in class, others hardly at all.

Fearful of allowing a discussion to lag, Teaching Assistants tend to call on the first students to raise their hands. Discussion become dominated by quick responders, a disproportionate number of whom are male.

Gender Dynamics in the College Classroom

Our classrooms contain certain hidden biases. We want students who actively participate in discussion. We tend to value a verbal style that is confident, assertive, and forceful. We regard a class as especially successful if students engage in debate and verbal sparring.

These biases make some students, disproportionately female, feel inadequate. They come to doubt their own abilities and skills.

Meanwhile, classroom dynamics vary markedly depending on the instructor's sex, the class' sex ratio, class size, and the gender relevance of the course.

Male and female students tend to have different speaking styles in the classroom. Male students tend to speak in order to establish status and hierarchy, and their style tends to be more argumentative. Many female students feel uncomfortable having their ideas evaluated publicly. Many prefer to work with others to solve problems.

In addition, male and female students tend to have different attitudes toward their own abilities and different ways of dealing with failure.

Differences in linguistic styles:

The linguistic expert Deborah Tannen has found that female students tend to:

- make shorter and quieter statements
- present their statements in a more hesitant, indirect, or "polite" manner or use "I" statements ("I guess . . .," "I was wondering if . . .")
- qualify their statements ("sort of," "maybe," "perhaps")
- add "tag" questions (" . . . isn't it?," " . . . don't you think?")
- ask questions rather than give statements, even if they know an answer
- use intonations that turn a statement into a question, or accompany their statements with smiles or averted eyes rather than more assertive gestures, such as pointing
- apologize for their statements ("I may be wrong, but . . .").

Differences in student behavior:

A number of influential studies have found that female students are

- less likely to raise their hands immediately in response to initial questions than male students
- less likely to blurt out answers or demand the teacher's attention
- less likely to receive peers' approval if they "break rules"
- less likely to receive feedback, whether praise, help, or criticism
- less likely to have their comments credited, developed, adopted, or even remembered by the group
- more likely to be interrupted when they speak or to have other students answer questions directed to them.

Differences in self-image and self-presentation:

Still other studies have concluded that female students:

- Are more likely than men to attribute success to hard work or luck rather than skill.
- Require higher grades to persist in a field than men do.
- Are more likely to blame themselves for a lack of success than are male students.
- Are more likely to refer to personal experiences in class.
- Tend to feel less comfortable in public debate.
- Are more likely to be interrupted when they speak.
- Are more likely to make one-time contributions and not speak again.
- Are more likely to phrase their comments in a hesitant manner.
- Are less likely than male students to shape the agenda of the discussion.

Feminist Pedagogy

Proponents of feminist pedagogies view the classroom as a site of power, privilege, and hierarchy, and regard teaching as an inherently political act. Yet the politics of the classroom, these scholars maintain, remain obfuscated.

Within the traditional classroom, these scholars argue, certain ideas, perspectives, and forms of behavior, discourse, and argumentation are favored. The conceptual design of a course tends to remain hidden and unexamined, while the selection of topics and readings reflects unspoken ideological presumptions. Meanwhile the approach to teaching in the traditional classroom, whether involving lecture or discussion, takes the significance of a particular text or topic for granted and fails to model the range of alternate interpretive or analytical approaches. All of these factors lead some, if not many, students to feel marginalized, discouraging deep learning.

What assumptions guide feminist pedagogy?

1. That the traditional classroom is a site of power, privilege, and hierarchy.
2. That teaching is a political act, instructors are political agents, and the methods of instruction, choice of readings, nature of the assignments, and forms of assessment have political and ideological significance.
3. That traditional approaches to teaching diminish student agency, limit the number of perspectives that are raised, and marginalize students who don't conform to certain norms.

Principles of Feminist Pedagogical Practices

All good teachers strive to create a nurturing and inclusive classroom environment. But proponents of feminist pedagogy go further. Feminist pedagogies:

1. Emphasize the psycho-social dimensions of teaching, especially empathy and cultural sensitivity.
2. Place issues centering on class, disability, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation at the center of inquiry.
3. Stress the value of experience—both the experience that comes from hands-on research and community-based learning and that which comes from each student's personal experiences.

4. Encourage disagreement and celebrate difference—and treats the classroom as a place where differences can be articulated and analyzed.
5. Treat students as participants and not as spectators.
6. Emphasize praxis: active inquiry and investigation.
7. Seek to develop a critical awareness of problems, power, and inequalities

Creating an Inclusive Classroom Environment

What can you do to ensure that no students are left behind?

1. Be acutely sensitive to the gender dynamics in your classroom.

Be aware of the subtle and even unconscious interpersonal dynamics. Don't let female students be interrupted. Make sure you call on women and men equally.

Above all, keep a close eye on who is speaking in your class. Observe whether a small group of students monopolize discussion.

2. Encourage all students to speak.

Pause for a few seconds before you call on a student to give everyone an opportunity to raise their hands.

Sequence students, so that neither men nor women dominate the discussion, and create opportunities for even the most reticent students to speak.

Don't assume that you are protecting shy students from embarrassment when you don't call on seemingly passive students. Most students who seem reticent, quiet, or uncommunicative are not particularly shy. Rather, these students withdraw because of the classroom's dynamics. And once they retreat, they are less likely to remain engaged in the class's content.

3. Provide all students with a lot of feedback and encouragement.

Use student names frequently. Maintain eye contact. Use the same tone of voice with male and female students. Provide positive feedback and encouraging comments to all of your students. Validate their opinions, and affirm their ability to succeed.

4. Be attentive to differences in communication styles.

Look for cues that a student wants to speak or ask a question. Increase the wait time after you ask a question.

5. Build metacognition into your teaching.

Metacognition—critical reflection about content and pedagogy—needs to become an integral part of the classroom experience. Encourage critical reflection about readings, assignments, and evaluation methods.

6. Rethink your classroom.

Vary your classroom format. Include small group activities. Integrate collaborative problem solving as well as competitive argument and debate. Rotate leadership in the class. Consider making every student a discussion leader or an expert at some point during the semester.