

SENSITIVITY TO WOMEN IN THE CONTEMPORARY CLASSROOM

While research continues to show that women participate less than men in class discussions, the reasons are complex and the academic climate is changing. The new generation of Harvard women has grown up in a time when gender equality is both taken for granted and not yet a reality. These women enter buildings that only recently housed a system of separate education, in which they still find traces of the old prejudices, but also substantial efforts to correct them. In their classes they still encounter aggressive men, but now also find assertive women and sensitive teachers who challenge the old patterns of interaction.

Our women students offer different reactions as these changes progress. When asked what characterizes her experience in the classroom, for example, one says, "I do not feel any more or less favored by any of my teachers because of my gender." ('96) Another insists, "I really can't think of a single class or section that I've taken in which my being a woman was an issue." ('95) Yet a third observes with many others, "Women [still] tend to be more afraid of speaking up... In the large lecture the men spoke up much more than the women." ('93)

These women may see themselves as conservatives or feminists, but they commonly resist such categorization. They may wish for special recognition or deny the need for it, but in either case risk new kinds of alienation in this complex period of transition.

As teachers, it is important for us to understand the shifting pressures affecting this generation of students if our efforts are to be relevant to them. Our attempts to promote standards of equality may seem awkward to students for whom the gender roles of the past have new meaning, and are adopted or rejected for different reasons than our own. Even the remedies at our disposal may seem as patronizing to these students as the paternalism that we intended them to replace.

Now, for example, when we attempt to draw out quiet women and restrain domineering men, we will find that we are confronted with a new set of questions: Should women who dominate the discussion be treated just like their male counterparts? Should they be rewarded as a corrective to the old prejudices? Should we aim for an egalitarian classroom in which the least aggressive students of either gender are encouraged, or should the classroom be a proving ground for those who have historically been silenced? Are quiet women to be drawn out for their own good, or should their silence be respected in accord with current sensibilities about gender differences and women's ways of learning?

It seems that we are caught in a dilemma -how not to be sexist, and how not to be overbearing in our anti-sexism. There is certainly no one right way to resolve the matter, but there are strategies suggested by students and teachers that may improve our chances of inspiring the full and equitable participation that we desire in our classes.

Strategies of inclusion for the contemporary classroom:

"Don't treat us differently - don't call on us more or less often - don't assume we're all experts on feminism if we're the only woman in the section." ('94)

*** Assume nothing about your students with regard to gender,** treat them equally, but make an effort to respect their differences.

*** Observe the gender dynamics in your classroom,** especially at the beginning of the class. Know your students individually, their attitudes and the reasons for their silences and respond accordingly:

- If they are quiet but engaged, an encouraging gesture may be all that is needed to include them.

- If they are being intimidated or interrupted by others in the class, your protective intervention may be called for in a way that gives them strength.

- If they are alienated or hesitant by nature, find ways to show that you are especially interested in what they have to say.

* **Create an invitation to speak** by offering a range of encouraging responses. If there are reticent women in the class, the sense that there is an invitation to speak without being put on the spot can be a strong inducement to participate.

* **To create openings for reticent women**, you might try to:

- Ask students all to take turns at presenting material.

- Assign them to small groups or supportive pairs to solve a problem.

- Give students time to answer and be sure to indicate that you are paying as much attention to the hesitant ones as to others.

- Credit a quiet student by making her the expert of the moment.

- Refer back to the comment of a quiet woman to make it a pillar of discussion.

- Refer to a silent student's written work in an affirming way.

- Avoid interruptions. Your own impulse to complete your students' thoughts for them, or that of other students may discourage quiet students.

- Resist filling every uncomfortable pause with your own voice.

"I get the feeling that the guys think I talk too much, which is not true since I talk as much as they do." ('96)

* **Avoid the temptation to call only on the most talkative students.** Appreciate aggressive women as you would aggressive men, but be aware of the effects that each has on others and the group.

* **Do not allow the same students to dominate every discussion.** Break up gendered monopolies by eliciting responses from others.

* **Encourage women who seem to be at a disadvantage** by virtue of culture or training: who expect to be interrupted, doubt their own authority or frame their comments as questions. But be ready to credit intelligent observation and engaged listening among them as a distinctive kind of participation.

* **Resist the temptation to respond to inquiring tones of voice as if they were questions.** Instead of answering, try to identify and credit the comment within a question.

* **Don't call on women to the exclusion of men.** Students tend to resent a new favoritism as much as the old.

Roles and forms of address:

"I think my classes should include the accomplishment of women in science, history etc." ('96)

* **Avoid the gendered forms of address** when discussing the professions or titles of distinction. If it is now common to refer to police officers and physicians by the inclusive "he or she," it is not so common when referring to Nobel Laureates, great writers or scientists. By doing so, you are crafting an image of achievement for the future and shaping the self-image of aspiring students.

* **Consider how your choice of examples affects your students' sense of inclusion in the discussion** or engagement with the subject matter. The anecdotes or hypothetical situations that you offer might be gender inclusive. When you tell stories about conferences or important events in your discipline, consider whether it sounds like an exclusive club.

* **When offering historical examples**, weigh how you express differences across time so that you are neither white-washing the past nor offending the egalitarian hopes of the present. You might comment on the significance of a historian's references to 19th century physicians or legislators as "these men..." without distorting text or context. Consider whether the stories of women's lives have been neglected in the historical picture that is being painted.

* **Be consistent when addressing women and men** in the use of first and last names, in making eye contact and in the tone of voice with which you are addressing them. Make equal demands of them in mastering the tools of your discipline.

* **Make sure that you give women as well as men opportunities to take leadership roles** or to assist you in class. Insist that women have equal access to classroom spaces or lab experiments. Be sure that women's access to your mentorship is equal, provide the same opportunities to talk with you outside of class or to assist in your research beyond course time.

* **Consider the possibility that your students exposed to feminism may regard empathetic group work and interactive learning as a preferred pedagogy** - they may be used to it. Weigh the possibility of including such components in your teaching, or the reasons and consequences of avoiding them.

* **Be aware that minority women may suffer the complex effects of gender, ethnicity and race in different combinations.** If one feels silenced for reasons of gender, another might for reasons of race or ethnicity - "*As an Asian-American I'm expected to be seen, but not heard.*" ('96) Do not assume that Caucasian women's experiences account for all women's experience, or that concerns about gender will be more pressing for your women students than those of race, class, religion or national origin.

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>