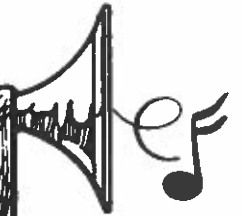




the TUTOR



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Equity in the Classroom: An Issue for Both Sexes

by Kay Kellam Cook

"Both men and women faculty—even those who are most concerned about sex discrimination—may inadvertently communicate to their students limiting preconceptions about appropriate and expected behaviors, abilities, career directions, and personal goals which are based on sex rather than on individual interest and ability."

"The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women," 1982, 2.

"The Classroom Climate" is the first national report on the differential treatment of men and women in the classroom. Funded by the Federal Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the project identified numerous instructional behaviors that result in differential treatment of the sexes. The report describes these behaviors and outlines recommendations for equitable behavior. In addition it provides five pages of references to research documenting the evidence stated in the body of the paper.

Educational equity has been a prominent pedagogical concern since 1876 when the university was declared an institution of the State and the enabling statutes stated that:

The objects of the University of Colorado are to provide the best and most efficient means of importing to *young men and women, on equal terms*, a liberal education and thorough knowledge of the different branches of literature and the arts and sciences, with their varied applications (italics added).

The emphasis on equality was reiterated by President Gordon Gee some 112 years later, when he stated in 1988,

As a university and as members of our society we must ensure that the dignity of every individual is actively respected and promoted. Just as the days of the ivory tower are over, so are concepts and stereotypes which limit the full capability of every person to seek his or her goal.

Graduate Teacher Program Handbook, 1988

Thus, administration, faculty, and students have expectations that classroom equity will be a concern of all involved in the educational process.

The Classroom Climate

Women Studies Professor Judith Sornberger's session on nonsexist teaching behaviors at the 1988 GTP Fall Intensive began with a discussion of classroom equity and nonhierarchical teaching. Professor Sornberger pointed out that the major issue is equity in general. "Although the hierarchy is firmly embedded in university teaching," she stated, "instructors can model nonhierarchical teaching by, for example, rethinking our roles as teachers."

Professor Sornberger emphasized that although traditionally as instructors we have been providers of information, we need to think of ourselves as providers of a learning environment. Equitable instruction begins by giving students more and more responsibility for the content of the course. In her workshop, she suggested that certain approaches can help create an equitable classroom environment: using group discussions and oral presentations, decentralizing the focus of the class by sitting in a circle, and helping students prepare for discussion sessions by giving them writing assignments.

Nonsexist Teaching Behaviors

"As instructors, we must model nonsexist behavior and language," Sornberger explains. "We want people to be aware of the words they use." Eliminating the exclusive "he"

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Graduate Teacher Program Spring Intensive

Friday, January 6 and
Monday, January 9, 1989
UMC 157 A & B, 9:00-4:00

All teaching assistants and graduate part-time instructors are cordially invited.

and "man" designations for all individuals, although important, is only a first step. Professor Sornberger conducts an activity in her class in which students are asked to write the words that come to mind when they hear the terms "lady," "woman," "girl." The students are generally surprised that what they have written under the categories of girl and lady are much more confining and stereotypical than those describing the much more inclusive "woman." Sornberger reminds her students that an 18-year-old female is a woman and should be addressed as such.

Similarly, the nationally known publisher of textbooks, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, provides author guidelines that state:

The term *ladies* is to be used when men are referred to as *gentlemen*, and not as a modifier (lady lawyer, lady mechanic). It is to be avoided as a mark of false respect, as in "cleaning lady."

Guidelines for the Development of Elementary and Secondary Instructional Materials, 11

The guidelines also provide some examples of non-gendered words that describe occupations and activities:

Use:	Avoid:
go-between, liaison	middleman
synthetic	manmade
police officer	police man
chairperson, chair	chairman, chairwoman
cave dweller	caveman

Judith Sornberger has had great success in her classes with an article, "Four Letter Words Can Hurt You," from the textbook *Language Awareness*. The article traces the etymological background of certain expletives. "Most, no matter if they're used sarcastically to a male or female, cast sexual aspersions on the female. Students, male and female, realize this when it's brought to their attention. Helping students become aware of these things is important," Sornberger states.

The content of our lectures and discussions can also reveal lack of gender balance. When referring to historical precedents, for example, it is important to make references to women's achievements as well as to those of men. Women have won the Nobel Peace Prize, and their work internationally in the peace effort has been substantial, yet often we draw examples from men's lives only. "When we concentrate on individuals in any given area," Sornberger points out, "men's names tend to crop up because their lives have been more public. We need to recognize others who, though important, have not made a 'name' for themselves."

Groups, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, can be used as examples as well as pointing out the participation of women in all important events. Introducing works by women in the established canon alters and modifies the way we define literary and historical periods. Accounts of women's experiences during the settlement of the West, for example, or during the French Revolution change our perceptions of those events.

Student Behaviors

Men and women students as well as their instructors should learn to monitor their comments in the classroom. "The Classroom Climate" states that "Researchers on sex differences in language have identified features which usually occur more often in the speech of women than of men. . . ." These ways of talking may put women students at a particular disadvantage in an academic setting. They include:

- hesitation and false starts ("I think . . . I was wondering . . .")
 - high pitch
 - "tag" questions ("This is really important, don't you think?")
 - a questioning intonation in making a statement ("The second chapter does most to clarify the theme?")
 - excessive use of qualifiers (Don't you think that *maybe sometimes* . . .")
 - Other speech forms that are excessively polite and deferential ("This is probably not important, but . . .")
- ("Classroom Climate," 10)*

The report also summarized studies that indicate that contrary to popular belief, "men talk more than women; men talk for longer periods of time and take more turns at speaking; men exert more control over the topic of conversation; men interrupt women much more frequently than men; and men's interruptions of women more often introduce trivial or inappropriately personal comments that bring the woman's discussion to an end or change its focus" (*"Classroom Climate," 8*).

An awareness of these patterns can enable instructors to help both male and female students interact more effectively by avoiding communication styles that inhibit discussion.

Instructor Behaviors

Judith Sornberger points out that "another important question is how women present themselves as *women*, women graduate students especially." Although the way that both women and men dress for their teaching suggests how seriously they take themselves as instructors, there are modes of presentation that go beyond dress. Professor Sornberger states that the woman authority figure as "mother" can create problems. She has observed, for example, that women instructors are more likely to bring food to class than men, thus giving the students the message of "teacher as nurturer," a message that can interfere with the students' taking responsibility for their learning and that can create problems when

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the teacher must be authority figure, in assigning grades, for example. "It's not that one shouldn't bring treats on special occasions, but instructors should not be the only persons bringing things in; they can take their turns along with everyone else. That's why student presentations are important. Students as well as their teachers bring in information on their own areas of expertise," Professor Sornberger states.

"'Protective compassion' doesn't work," Sornberger adds. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's work in *Lies, Secrets, and Silences*, Sornberger states that "We don't do our women students a favor by not having standards. The message is that we think they can't handle the debilitating incidents in their lives. We must be careful of rewarding women for less. We can accommodate their needs without changing our standards."

Studies from "The Classroom Climate" emphasize that these attitudes will, in fact, lower the self-esteem of women students and make them doubt their abilities and competence. Faculty of both sexes, the report states, "tend to devalue women and their work. . . . faculty may view and respond to the same behavior differently depending on the sex of the students" (4). An unconscious limited view of women's abilities leads some faculty "to attribute males' success to skill or ability but females' success to luck or lack of difficulty of the task to be performed" (6).

Monitoring and Changing Classroom Behaviors

"The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?" provides suggestions that enable instructors to examine and change classroom behaviors:

- Pay particular attention to classroom interaction patterns during the first few weeks of class, and make a special effort to draw women into discussion at that time.



"Just as the days of the ivory tower are over, so are concepts and stereotypes which limit the full capability of every person to seek his or her goal."

—Gordon Gee

- Make a specific effort to call on women and men students by name.
- Intervene in communication patterns among students that may shut out [one or the other sex]. For example, if men students pick up on each other's points, but ignore an appropriate comment offered by a woman, slow the discussion, and pick up on the comment that has been overlooked.
- When talking about occupations or professions in class discussions, use language that does not reinforce limited views of men's and women's roles and career choices. Often examples can be cast into the "I/you" form with the instructor taking the role of one party and the class the other (e.g., "Suppose I am a doctor and you come to me because . . ." rather than the woman went to the doctor and he told her . . .). Additionally, use examples with feminine pronouns, such as "Here is a geologist who finds herself with the following discovery."
- Avoid placing professional women in a "special category," for example, "woman" (or worse, "lady") accountant. Also avoid using special terms for women: poetess, authoress, usherette, aviatrix. Use poet, author, usher, pilot, etc. *Holt, Rinehart "Guide," 11*).
- Make eye contact with women as well as with men students when asking a question or inviting response.
- Note patterns in class discussion to determine if students of either sex are interrupted more often—either by yourself or by other students.
- Give men and women students equal time to respond after asking a question.
- Include "classroom climate" questions on the Faculty Course Questionnaire, e.g., "Does the instructor treat men and women equally by avoiding sexist language, using sex-balanced examples, etc.?"
- Avoid sexist humor and overtly sexist comments. They will interfere with classroom learning and have negative effects that go far beyond the immediate classroom.

(*"Classroom Climate," 6,16*)

Clearly, classroom equity means equity for both sexes as well as equity between students and instructors. As instructors, we need to monitor teaching behaviors that will affect students' academic achievement and their self-esteem.

Material for this article was obtained from "Nonsexist Teaching Behaviors," a GTP workshop conducted by Judith Sornberger of Women Studies; a personal interview with Professor Sornberger; "The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?" by Roberta M. Hall, Association of American Colleges, 1982; and "Guidelines for the Development of Elementary and Secondary Instructional Materials: The Treatment of Sex Roles," Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975.



Words from the Wise

Arnolphe: I have an important document which will teach you the duty of a wife. I do not know the author, but it is some good soul or other and I desire that this shall be your only study. . . . Let me see if you can read it fairly.

Agnes (reading): *The Maxims of Marriage; or the Duties of a Wife; together with her Daily Exercise* . . . Amongst her furniture, however she dislikes it, there must be neither writing-desk, ink, paper, nor pens. According to all good rules everything written in the house should be written by the husband.

Molière
The School for Wives, 1662

To render also the social contract truly equitable, and in order to spread those enlightening principles, which alone can ameliorate the fate of man, women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men.

Mary Wollstonecraft
Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1792

The object of this Essay is to explain . . . that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

John Stuart Mill
The Subjection of Women, 1870

And yet, in the school room more than any other place, does the difference of sex, if there is any, need to be forgotten.

Susan B. Anthony
Quoted in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*,
Volume 2, Theodore Stanton & Harriot
Stanton Blatch, Eds. 1922

The TUTOR Graduate Teacher Program Newsletter

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