

Language and Gender in the Classroom

E-Portfolio: Language and Gender in the Classroom

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Abstract

Due to the pandemic and online learning, this assignment was very personal. I reflected on my experiences in the classroom setting from elementary school to where I am now in college. I have a very different outlook and perspective on life now than I did when I was younger, and my views have changed substantially. I have an additional appreciation for my teachers throughout the years--they were fair in who they would call on in the classroom. Many students have not had this experience, which is tragic in my opinion. Everyone's thoughts and opinions matter, and true learning will not happen if voices are stifled. We would see a limited view of reality. The thoughts I had while working on this assignment were very deep; I come from a family of teachers who all have their unique experiences and stories from the classroom. My mom taught preschool, my grandma taught 5th & 6th grade, my grandpa was a high school counselor for decades, and my dad teaches at the college level (previously at USAFA and now at UCCS). I was thinking about their stories throughout the duration of this assignment, and it is very eye-opening to think how gender stratification in the classroom has changed from the 1960's to present day.

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Research Inquiries & Findings

Disclaimer: all 'data' in this report is reflections of my time in the traditional classroom setting. All of my courses are online this semester, so I have not been in the traditional classroom setting since March 2020.

As you attend classes, take careful notes about who speaks.

- As a young kid in elementary school, there was a pretty even balance of male and female students participating. The boys would generally be louder and easier to hear, and often times exude more enthusiasm for a topic they were familiar with. The girls were generally quieter and softer spoken, but there were exceptions to this-just as there were with the boys.
- In middle school I began to notice a change in classroom participation. Middle school is, in my opinion, the 'judgiest' time of our young lives, even more so than high school (I felt like in high school it was more self-inflicted judgements, whereas kids were just flat out mean in middle school). From what I recall, it was very infrequent that girls would participate in classroom discussions, especially in math and science courses. The girls were more willing to voice opinions in art, English, and social studies classes. The boys were always enthusiastic about classes that involved science--whether it was chemistry, biology, physics, or even math.
- In high school, the balance of student participation went back to a fairly even 50/50 split. Boys were more participative in classes such as physics, shop classes, and

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gym. Girls were more participative in chemistry, English, and foreign languages. (There were, of course, exceptions to all of this).

- Once I reached college, participation has been an even 50/50 split, especially in my upper division courses. Many intro courses I had my freshmen year carried some of the participation tendencies of high school. In the upper division classes, students seemed to be no longer be afraid to speak up if they encountered a problem or if they had a question.

1. How long do they speak?

- Elementary school: the boys would generally speak longer than the girls did. The girls were relatively clear and concise, the boys would often finish their question but continue on a tangent for a while.
- Middle school: All students spoke as quickly and quietly as they could, unless they were very passionate about the subject matter in the class.
- High school: students spend an equal amount of time talking. The boys (especially the jocks and athletes) tended to ask more 'dumb' questions--questions that everyone knew the answer to, but they thought would be funny to ask (we all know those types of kids).

2. Roughly how many words do they use?

- Elementary boys: average of 10 words, including the greeting of "Mr./Mrs. XXXXX: [question]".
- Elementary girls: average of 5 words: Mr./Mrs. XXXXX: I need help".

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- Middle school boys: average of 3 or 6 words: "I don't understand/I am confused can you help?"
 - Middle school girls: same as above, everyone tries to say as little as possible.
 - High school boys (regular classes): average of 15 words.
 - High school boys (honors/AP classes): average of 20-25 words, questions were articulate and pointed.
 - High school girls: same as the above, but often times they would speak quieter and have to repeat themselves.
3. Does instructor encourage or discourage communication by gender identity?
- I did not really observe much discouragement of communication by gender identity at any point of my educational career. I have been very impressed by this. I have definitely observed encouragement of communication as opposed to discouragement. I suppose this could be viewed positively, but it's unfair to encourage one gender to speak more than the other. My high school shop classes (such as woodworking and CAD/laser design) were primarily taught by men, and they offered more enthusiasm when the boys in the class would speak up. I was surprised by the lack of encouragement for the girls, but I also wasn't surprised-- the male teachers appeared to connect more with the male students. They thought more alike compared to the female students, and this probably made communication much easier. I would infer that the shop teachers had an easier time offering constructive criticism to male students as they (male students) received the criticism much better than the female students. This situation was also true of one of my middle school shop teachers, Mr. Dalrymple. He

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encouraged the boys much more than the girls in woodworking class. Mr. Lee, my shop teacher for metal casting and welding, encouraged all students but encouraged female students differently than the male students. He fostered their personal enthusiasm and encouraged curiosity and exploration more with them than he did the male students. What was most interesting to me about this scenario: Mr. Dalrymple had two daughters, Mr. Lee (that I know of) had two daughters and one son. I'm personally curious if this was a similar situation to my neighbor growing up. Mr. Qazi was a wonderful mechanic and loved restoring old American cars, he is how I discovered my passion for automobiles. He had two daughters who wanted to drive the pretty Camaro's and El-Camino's, but they didn't want to get their hands dirty to fix them up (he told them they couldn't drive the cars unless they learned how to repair them). He took me under his wing and we would frequently be working in the garage until 2AM, when my mom would come over in her 'street' PJ's as we jokingly called them and say, "Ok boys, it's time to stop playing with cars and go to sleep." At one point, he told my parents that he loved teaching me about cars and working together because he "always wanted a son to do this type of stuff with, but didn't want more than two kids."

4. How often does the instructor call on varied gender identities?
 - o I observed that instructors were very balanced in who they called on in classes, throughout my entire academic career. I am so thankful that this has been my experience, and I had never thought about it until this assignment. I realize that this is not the case everywhere, so I am very fortunate to have had this

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experience. Even in my previously mentioned shop classes, both teachers were fair and balanced with the ratio of male/female students called upon.

Analysis

1. Do you notice differences based on gender identity?
 - (I'm assuming this question means different treatment of different students based on gender identity)
 - In regards to responding to student questions, I did not notice a difference between male/female students receiving more/less attention based on their gender identity. I did observe that the instructors, in non-subjective classes (math/physics/science) were generally 'softer' and less blunt in their responses to female students when compared to more subjective classes (English, social studies with opinion, etc.). Students in those subjective classes were responded to in the same manner, regardless of gender identity.
2. Does gender affect other tendencies in the way people present themselves through language?
 - This was an area where I noticed a substantial difference between how male and female students ask questions. Generally, the male students appear more confident when asking questions and had no problem immediately following up with the instructor if their question was not completely answered. They are direct and relatively forceful. Female students tended to be quieter when asking questions, and they would not re-engage the instructor if they received an insufficient answer. They would often wait until the end of class (I observed this

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behavior is most common at the collegiate level) to re-ask the question when they could have an individual conversation with the instructor.

3. Do you see differences in science, math, or humanities classes?
 - Absolutely. I mentioned a lot about this topic in previous statements, but there definitely is a difference in each class. Instructors in objective classes such as science and math tend to favor male student inquiries and give more direct responses. In subjective classes such as English and humanities, there was less favoritism exhibited by the instructors. The students were in more of a level playing field in these courses.
4. Develop a hypothesis about language and gender in the classroom.
 - I hypothesize that females are likely to use softer language with other females in the classroom setting, and males are more likely to use direct language with other males. Instructors demonstrate favoritism based on age-old gender stereotypes: men are better with 'concrete' subjects such as math and science, females are better with 'fluid' subjects such as English and humanities. From my observations, these stereotypes are still being enforced, but they are being enforced unintentionally. The classroom settings I have been in are quite different from a classroom setting when my grandparents were in school. All of my immediate family are teachers, and it's been interesting to hear their perspectives about this topic over the years. When my grandma describes how she would conduct her 5th & 6th grade classrooms in regards to gender stratification, it is quite different from what we see in classrooms today.

