

Creating Gender Equity In Your Teaching

Contents

- Introduction
- Classroom Interactions
- Gender-Related Language
- Gender Related Patterns of Communication
- Gender-Based Assumptions
- Campus Resources
- Selected References

Introduction

Research has shown that male and female experiences in academic settings can be vastly different. Even Students sitting side-by-side in the same classroom can be experiencing a situation differently. Frequently these different experiences lead women to feel less confident, to contribute less to the class and to be perceived as less capable students. External factors contribute a great deal to the success of students of the same innate intelligence, motivation and confidence. This guide is designed to give you ideas about how you can regulate some of those external factors in your teaching settings, thereby becoming a more effective instructor for all your students, including the women in your classes. Please use this handbook as a reference, one tool you employ to improve your teaching effectiveness. Remember: The information in this handbook applies to all instructors; both women and men are prone to gender-biased teaching techniques.

This guide contains general ideas to help you understand the role gender plays in communication and interactions. Both men and women instructors, as well as men and women students, may display the behaviors described. Research shows that more women than men students tend to follow the patterns discussed, but these behaviors are not characteristic of all women students in all situations.

By examining your teaching techniques with regard to gender issues, you will help yourself to be more sensitive to all students in your class and become better positioned to relate to ethnic differences, disabilities, and other nontraditional orientations.

By using the ideas in this handbook you can improve your interaction in all settings; the classroom is only one arena for gender-biased interactions.

Many factors in addition to gender influence classroom experiences for students. Cultural differences and differences in age or physical ability can play a significant role in a student's comfort with or ability to succeed in academic settings. Handbooks similar to this one, focused on issues that students with culturally different backgrounds face, would help instructors see and understand unconscious behaviors and assumptions that hinder these students' success. We hope that this gender equity handbook will be a beginning!

Classroom Interactions

Setting the Tone

The interactions you have with your students will determine the level of student contributions in the classroom. Do you call only on people who raise their hands? With whom do you make eye contact? What message do you send with your body language? Do you listen carefully, or do you appear to be busy with other things?

Be conscious of enlarging the group you tend to interact with, and work on including others through eye contact and specific invitations to participate. Move around the classroom and address groups in various areas. Note your body language when students are speaking; don't shuffle papers or look away. These and other non-verbal cues convey the impression that student comments are not respected. Give the same level of attention and interaction to responses from all your students unless you are consciously trying to decrease the focus on a dominant student.

Establishing Class Norms

Group interactions are controlled by both explicit and implicit normative rules. For example, if there is no rule for students about raising their hand to answer questions and on the first day of class several people shout out their ideas, an implicit rule has been established dictating that the way to communicate in this class is to be forceful. Such a pattern tends to favor assertive males.

You are responsible for the dynamics and the normative rules that develop in your class. Establish rules and norms from the beginning that are compatible with the way you want the class to operate. By establishing positive norms early on, you will find that you have more ways to guide the class as you choose.

Using Gender Sensitive Material

Course material, especially older material, is sometimes not balanced in its use of masculine and feminine pronouns and examples, tending more heavily towards masculine terms. Using such material can reinforce ideas that women are not important or valid as contributors to a field of study.

Try to use course material that clearly includes women and men. If course material you need to use ignores one gender, be clear about why this material is important, state that you realize the material is exclusive, and try to compensate for bias in your presentation of it.

Setting Response Etiquette

Females tend to raise their hands to answer or ask a question; males are more likely to volunteer spontaneously. This disparity has the effect of reducing women's contributions to the dialogue and limiting the amount of clarification they receive.

Note students who raise their hands but do not get the opportunity to answer, and call on them.

Observe the patterns of communication in your class and consciously include those students who are not often heard from.

Allowing Wait Time

Wait time is the pause you allow before a student or students respond to a question you have posed. Female students tend to take longer before replying. A short wait time may reduce women's opportunities to answer and may reinforce the notion that they are not as capable of handling the material as men who are quicker to respond.

Be conscious of the time you allow your students for answers. Provide an adequate wait time (at least 4-5 seconds). If waiting is difficult for you, count to five and then call on someone.

Organizing Lab and Work Groups

Work group organization and supervision is an important aspect of class work. Who makes up each group? How are groups structured? How are tasks delegated within the group? Sometimes women are pushed into or to volunteer for "secretarial" roles which do not give them experience with other tasks. Hierarchies can develop in groups so that only a few students tend to take on the roles that provide the most active learning experiences.

All students need to gain experience in all task roles. Assign rotating tasks in each group, change group membership during the quarter, or develop other methods through which you can break up exclusionary hierarchies. Examine gender composition within groups and monitor the level of activity and participation by each group member so that you ensure that all group members gain practical experience from group work.

Giving Encouragement

Frequently, women are not given the same amount or type of encouragement and praise as are men. They are given short "uh-huh's" and nods, while men are given verbal praise or are encouraged to work harder. This different treatment can be very subtle.

Become aware of your comments to your students regarding their questions, answers, work etc. Concentrate on challenging and supporting them all equally. Enlist the help if someone to observe your class and watch for gender-based interactions with your students. Consider having someone from the Teaching Resources Center videotape your class so you can observe yourself.

Monitoring Interruptions

Studies show that women tend to get interrupted more frequently than men. When students get interrupted, the message received is that their ideas are wrong and/or not important or valid. When interruptions are allowed to occur, many students (especially women and students from non-confrontational cultures) will choose not to speak or ask any further questions.

Be aware of interruptions, your own and those of your students. Let the class know how you want them to respond at the beginning of the quarter so there are no surprises. Call on students instead of allowing them to volunteer information or require responders to raise their hands. Develop a system that works for everyone.

Raising Confidence

Even when they are as competent or more competent than men, women tend to lack confidence in their abilities and downplay their accomplishments to a greater extent than men do. Women tend to evaluate their own performance more disparagingly than men achieving at the same level. However, women gain a great deal of confidence and validation from the encouragement of their instructors.

Utilize your position as an instructor to provide positive feedback and act as a reality check for your students. Make it a point to give praise as well as constructive criticism. Tell students about your own triumphs and weaknesses as a student and a professional. Stories about overcoming difficult situations and succeeding despite limitations remind students that they can have weak areas and still succeed.

Avoiding Stereotypes

Sometimes females are treated as members of their gender group rather than as individuals. EXAMPLE: "Women write such neat lab reports." Generalizations such as these are especially offensive to female students when they notice that male students don't get "clumped" this way. Women sometimes feel their performance is being used as a measure of all women, and this feeling can create a great deal of pressure, inhibition and/or resentment.

Take care to regard each student's attributes and weaknesses as her/his own, without regard for gender, race, age, etc. Don't expect or request a student to speak to, or respond for, the points of view of others similar to themselves. Don't use stereotype-based comments, no matter how common, unless you are using them as examples of inappropriate generalizations.

Monitoring Student Interactions

Interactions between students in your classroom play a role in setting the tone of the classroom. When student actions are inappropriate through stereotyping, belittling, joking, etc. the classroom climate becomes unsupportive.

You cannot directly control all interactions between students in the classroom. But if you actively point out and dissuade activities, comments, and jokes that reflect stereotyping or bias, you will create an environment where gender put-downs and insensitivity (even in the guise of humor) go unrewarded or are actively discouraged.

Regularizing Modes of Address

Sometimes instructors use different modes of address for students by gender group, for example, calling men by their last name but women by their first name or vice versa.

Use the same form of address for all your students to signify that all students in the classroom are at the same status level.

Remember that:

Both women and men are prone to gender biased teaching techniques.

Information in this handbook highlights general trends based on research. Not all men nor all women fit any particular category.

Becoming more aware of the role gender plays in your classroom will help you to understand all of your students better

These ideas are helpful in many other situations outside of the classroom

Gender-Related Language

Inclusive Language

Contrary to traditional thinking, “generic terms” such as mankind, chairman, and man are not interpreted as referring to both men and women. Research shows that these male-based terms cause people to think not of females and males, but just males.

EXAMPLE: Two graduate classes were asked to sketch designs for the cover of a new book their professor had completed. The first class was asked to sketch for a book entitled Urban Man. The results were sketches of men in urban settings. The second class was asked to draw a cover for a book entitled Urban Life. They drew sketches of people of both sexes and all ages.

Inclusive language is an important acknowledgement of the presence and values of women in your class. Use gender inclusive language such as “he” and “she” interchangeably, or find non-gender specific terms to refer to people. Develop sensitivity to the gender implications of the language you use in class; find substitutes for terms that exclude women or others from the content of your message. When your classroom dialogue references women, it validates their existence in the class, but also, in larger context, validates their past and/or potential contributions to that field of study.

EXAMPLE: Substitute chairperson for chairman, and workforce for manpower. Say, “The engineer makes a proposal, and he or she...”

Analogies

Analogies are a common and convenient teaching tool; however, many analogies are useful only to students who are knowledgeable about their basis.

EXAMPLE: An analogy of the trajectory of a football or the workings of a carburetor is of no value to a student unfamiliar with these concepts.

Use examples that apply to all students or use analogies that cut broadly across gender lines. It’s also helpful to develop a variety of analogies.

Generalizations

Generalizations often don’t apply to everyone and pointedly exclude some people. EXAMPLE: “Your girlfriend can tell you about...”

Choose language and statements that include everyone, such as “Your significant other” or “Your boyfriend or girlfriend can tell you...”

Stereotypical Jokes

Jokes and analogies can be effective in academic settings. Obviously, sexist jokes are inappropriate. However, many other jokes based on stereotypes that categorize people on the basis of a single attribute, i.e., blond jokes or fat jokes, are also inappropriate.

Think about the potential for offensiveness of jokes and analogies that you make. If you realize that you have made an inappropriate comment, acknowledge it to the class and apologize. It shows your students you are concerned and will make you a more approachable and appreciated instructor.

Comments on Appearance

Women are much more likely than men to receive comments on their clothes and appearance. These comments may be meant as compliments; however, they also send the message to women that their looks are more notable than their academic abilities.

Compliment all students equally. If you notice details about your students, address both men and women or put comments into context, e.g., "You are dressed up today. Do you have an interview?", and then focus on the interview not the appearance.

Gender-Related Patterns of Communication

Using Varied Communication Styles

Gender related differences in the basic style of communication occur in most classrooms. More men than women enjoy and feel validated by verbal sparring and challenge; they receive affirmation through opposition. On the other hand, validation for many women comes from gaining consensus among the group. Women may tend to present information in a way that invites other opinions, rather than defends a single opinion or point.

Be careful not to respond to different communication patterns in ways that are unintentionally judgmental. It will help all students if you both use and respond to different styles of communication. Expose your class to varied educational experiences such as collaborative learning groups, debate, consensus building, etc.

Using Qualifiers

Frequently women add qualifiers to statements or turn them into questions. This way of speaking can make a woman sound hesitant and unsure, which may not be the case. EXAMPLE: "What if we....?" or "Perhaps we could...."

Encourage a hesitant-sounding student to elaborate on her/his statement. Don't assume that she/he does not have a clear idea in mind because she/he phrased a statement as a question or qualified it to encourage consensus.

Rising Intonation

Some women tend to raise the pitch of their voice at the end of a word or statement. This pattern can make a strong statement sound unsure or questioning, so that a listener might have a tendency to downplay its significance or accuracy.

First, understand that what you hear could be a confident statement couched in hesitant language. Be careful that no student is shamed, dominated or otherwise disadvantaged because of a style of expression. Secondly, help your students understand how you hear these statements. Although all types of communication styles are valid forms of self-expression, some may be more effective in given situations. If you hear these statements as hesitant, encourage your women students to express ideas with more confidence.

Gender-Based Assumptions

Default Assumptions

Default assumptions are those that people subconsciously assume because of their past experiences. They may not be valid. EXAMPLE: A new professor was in her classroom for the first day of the class. A male student entered and asked who she was. She asked him “Who do you think I am?” The student replied that he thought she must be a secretary helping out the absent professor.

Begin exploring your own default assumptions to become conscious of them and question their validity. Encourage your students to do the same thing.

Physical Strength

Frequently it is assumed that women are weak and unable to handle machines and heavy weights, so men are supposed to take on the “tough tasks”. It is easy to allow and even reinforce these stereotypes, but doing so doesn’t promote the best interests of either men or women.

Be sure that all students are given equal opportunity to perform to their physical and mental capabilities. They will all have their limits of endurance, but do not assume you know what these limits are.

Gender Appropriate Behavior

Assumptions about “gender appropriate behavior” are often confused with academic performance. An assertive, strong woman who is willing to speak her mind and stand up for herself is labeled very unflattering. An assertive man doing the same thing would not be regarded negatively, since assertiveness is considered acceptable and even desirable in a man.

Watch out for gender-biased judgments about women’s assertive behavior. Your focus should be on education and academic merit. Try not to allow your focus to get shifted by unflattering labels and stereotypes placed on women by students or other instructors.

Value of Work

Sometimes there is a subtle tendency to devalue the work of women. Some women avoid putting their first name on work they submit, for fear that their sex makes a difference in how their work is

perceived.

Evaluate yourself for possible biases. Consciously value men and women's comments, ideas and work equally. Have students put their name on the last page of assignments so that a name does not influence the grading.

Blaming

Men have a tendency to perceive problems they encounter in their academic pursuits as a problem with the system, something external to their own abilities and efforts. Women have a tendency to perceive problems they encounter as deficiencies internal to themselves. EXAMPLE: After a difficult exam, four students independently visited the professor. Both of the males said that the exam was very difficult and unfair; both of the women said they lacked ability and accused themselves of "not studying hard enough" for the exam.

Be aware of these differences in blame assumption; it can help you understand your students' motivations and comments. Critically examine your students' assumption of internal or external blame and help them realistically evaluate their performance. You can help all your students place their work in a more balanced context.

Crying

Sometimes females express strong emotions through tears, while a more common mechanism for men expressing strong emotion is anger. Tears are often assumed to be a sign of weakness and inability to handle a situation. Assumptions that tears are equal weakness are incorrect and counterproductive to resolving the situation.

It's important not to let tearfulness sway your good judgment, or your readiness to deal with a student's concerns. Allow a few minutes for the student to regain composure and then deal with the issues. Crying can produce an uncomfortable situation, but do not let the external emotions inhibit you from seeing the issue or problem and working with the student.

Campus Resources

Teaching Resources Center (752-6050)

Provides consultation, support and services for instructors, videotaping of classes and analysis of teaching effectiveness. The TRC also provides workshops and individual consultations on equitable and inclusive teaching for professors, TA's and postdoctoral scholars. The TRC publishes a Teaching Handbook for TA's that can be downloaded here: <http://trc.ucdavis.edu/TRC/teachguide/index.html>

Women's Resources and Research Center (752-3372)

Offers educational programs, library, research activities, consultation and referrals, newsletter, discussion groups and advocacy for students, faculty and staff.

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Written by: Robby Henes, Director
Center for Women in Engineering
Edited by: Nora McGuinness, Director
Publications/Coordinator, Acagrams
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