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Women in the Classroom: The Sounds of Silence

Phrases such as the “chilly climate for women in the classroom” and the “gender-sensitive classroom” have been circulating on campuses for some time. Most professors want to believe that they create a comfortable learning environment for all students. Many professors are trying both to eschew exclusive language in the classroom and to broaden the syllabus to include the contributions of women in the field. Seldom, on our campus at least, does one openly hear the complaints of the recalcitrant: “I don’t know why we need these constant reminders about ‘women’s issues’; the pendulum has swung too far the other way.”

How many professors, however, have modified the academic discourse to make it more inviting to the women in class? How many have considered whether the already inhospitable climate of large classes, all too common today, may be doubly disconcerting for women? How many have recognized that a woman’s academic performance may be more affected than a man’s by events that take place outside the classroom? And, having considered, recognized, and reflected, how many have actually changed the way they teach in order to accommodate these differences?

Evidence suggests that women and men learn in different ways and, as a result, may respond differently to what they have learned. “Separate knowing,” maintaining a critical distance between the material and yourself, is prized and is reflected in much academic discourse.

Blythe Clinchy (1991) calls the “woman’s way of knowing” *connected knowing*. Most common among, but certainly not exclusive to, women, it is not

highly valued or recognized in academia. Connected knowing is the ability to put yourself in someone else’s mind, to establish an intimacy with the thinker and the thought. It requires more of a process than separate knowing. For example, it takes longer to follow an author’s argument step-by-step, get to know him, his life, his motivations, and so establish a personal connection – an intimacy between you and the work – than it does to maintain a critical distance and produce a detached, impersonal comment. Hence, women may take longer to respond to questions in class, longer to formulate responses to material, and may be less likely to be negative about material than men. The female discourse which includes a more “tentative” approach contains more personal references. Translated as being unsure, uncertain, or wishy-washy, this type of discourse is not valued in academia.

However, as Bernice Sandler, Senior Associate of the Centre for Women Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., pointed out at a recent workshop on Gender Equity in Teaching at Saint Mary’s University, the seeming tentativeness of women’s discourse does not indicate that they have misunderstood or are having difficulty with the material; they are asking questions and entering into dialogue because they know, correctly, that issues are not cut and dried. Sandler also suggests that women’s discourse is very helpful in the classroom. In their efforts to achieve connectedness with the material, women may ask questions and make points which enrich everyone’s understanding.

In this context, Adrienne Rich (1978) invites professors to listen not just to what women students say, but how they say it. This in itself is a clear reflection of the way women are learning and respond-

ing to the material: "Listen to a woman groping for language in which to express what is on her mind, sensing that the terms of academic discourse are not her language, trying to cut down her thoughts to the dimensions of a discourse not intended for her (for it is not fitting that a woman should speak in public)."

Adrienne Rich further invites professors to "Listen to the women's voices. Listen to the silences, the unasked questions, the blanks." In contrast, "Listen to . . . the male assumption that people will listen [to them], even when the majority of the group is female. Look at the faces of the silent and those who speak."

The connectedness which women prefer may result in a hesitation to speak out in class for reasons as simple as wanting to know more about the professor.

Some teachers resent women for their desire to "personalize everything." Clinchy says: "For many women . . . development takes place in the context of personal relationships, and the quality of the relationship affects the quality of learning." Teachers of large classes may wish to keep this need in mind and make a deliberate effort to disclose some personal information to the class for the sake of the women students. Indeed, some personal disclosure is a good idea in large classes to help warm the atmosphere.

It is interesting to note that women in large classes may be at a considerable disadvantage. Research tells us that the drawbacks of large-class learning include diminished rapport between teacher and student, a feeling of anonymity, and reduced opportunities to ask and answer questions (Wulff, Nyquist, Abbott; 1987). For women, somewhat reluctant to ask questions and already experiencing low self-esteem in the classroom, this may be a double jeopardy.

Clinchy writes that, for women, the most powerful learning experiences occur outside the classroom in their encounters with faculty and advisors. Again, this should give professors of all classes – but especially of large classes – impetus to arrange meetings with their students outside class or, at the very least, to encourage students to see them during office hours.

Professors should be sensitive to women's needs for connected knowing and should ask questions which acknowledge that need, such as "What in your experience leads you to say that?" This approach will result in a suspension of judgement but greater appreciation

of the material for all students, suggests Clinchy.

By extension, many women may have difficulty responding to material where there is no connection to themselves, either because they cannot establish a connection at all or because there is something in their experience which is so contrary to the material that it thwarts any possibility of connection.

Unfortunately, women's experiences outside the classroom – on university campuses and beyond – are often negative ones. Such things as date rape, sexual harassment, and other forms of on-campus

assault (whether implicit or explicit) can combine with the fear of violence and violation off-campus to affect a woman's experience and so her approach and reaction to material. As Adrienne Rich says, "If it is dangerous for me to walk

home late one evening from the library, because I am a woman and can be raped, how self-possessed, how exuberant can I feel as I sit working in that library? How much of my working energy is drained by the subliminal knowledge that, as a woman, I test my physical right to exist each time I go out alone?"

More than that, these feelings of insecurity, lack of self-esteem, and pervasive feelings of physical risk may have a profound effect on a woman's willingness to take intellectual risks in the classroom. "The undermining of self, of a woman's sense of her right to occupy space and walk freely in the world, is deeply relevant to education," says Adrienne Rich

Professors may see symptoms of this lack of self-esteem in many ways: an unwillingness to speak out in class, a reluctance to enter a debate or offer a contrary view, or an apologetic preamble and self-dismissal to anything a woman does say: "I may be wrong, but isn't the writer saying . . .?" or "This may be a stupid comment, but . . ."

Adrienne Rich suggests further evidence of this self-deprecation: "[Listen to a woman] reading her paper aloud at breakneck speed, throwing her words away, deprecating her own work by a reflex pre-judgement: I do not deserve to take up time and space."

Granted, Adrienne Rich's comments were made in 1978. One would be forgiven for believing that things have changed since then, that "the chilly climate for women" in the class had undergone a warming trend. Not so. Blythe Clinchy is writing more than 12 years later, and women's ways of knowing, women's

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Blythe Clinchy

needs for connected knowing, are still being undervalued and ignored in the classroom.

As Adrienne Rich exhorted teachers in 1978, "Listen to the silences." A lot of students have been awfully quiet for an awfully long time.

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Women's Studies at Dalhousie

Women's Studies courses have been widely adopted in leading universities across North America during the past 20 years. In Canada there are more than a dozen undergraduate programmes and at least two graduate programmes. At Dalhousie, Women's Studies is an undergraduate majors programme which draws on the disciplines of English, French, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology and Social Anthropology, and Theatre, and the professions of Education and Social Work. It is designed for students who wish to focus on women's experience as the major concentration of their undergraduate degree.

The goal of the Women's Studies major is to demonstrate the usefulness of gender as a category of analysis. Students will develop interconnections among the fundamental questions raised by scholarship on women through a selection of classes in the humanities and social sciences. Because the major is interdisciplinary, a student will also gain a perspective on women's experience through the examination of other issues such as race, class, and cultural differences which are central to the study of gender.

A critical awareness of methodology in the organization of knowledge and the framework for analysis is important throughout the body of the student's work.

The programme has been established in cooperation with Mount Saint Vincent University's Women's Studies programme.

The following are just a few of the varied courses offered in Women's Studies at Dalhousie:

Women in Western Political Thought

The role of women in political life has been vilified, praised, or ignored by major thinkers. Pertinent texts are read along with interpretations by modern feminists in order to assess why the formal political enfranchisement of women has not resulted in greater substantial equality.

Gender Issues in Education

Central concerns in Education include classroom practices, politics and ideology of the curriculum, family-school relations, and the transition from school to work. Recent feminist critiques have forced educators to re-examine these areas of concern. This class considers how gender analysis deconstructs and reconstructs our understanding of central economic, social, and cultural issues in Education.

Women in Capitalist Society: The North American Experience

An examination of the impact of industrialization and urbanization on "women's sphere" in society and of the emergence of various strains of feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Quebec Women Writers/ Ecrivaines Québécoises

An exploration of women as revealed in texts by Quebec women writers.

Editor's note: Last year, the OI DT distributed a Teaching Excellence bulletin featuring an article titled "Tales told out of school: Women's reflections on their undergraduate experience" by Blythe Clinchy. Several Dalhousie faculty commented favorably on the article, and two professors submitted texts relating specific classroom experiences concerned with "connected knowing" and "affirmative action." Workshops will further explore these issues. Please submit additional texts and suggestions to the OI DT.

Connected teaching - Connected knowing

My first experience teaching the Social Psychology section in Introduction to Psychology was a bad one. Coming in late in the year for my turn, I found detached students with wait-and-see attitudes, and a "peanut gallery" discipline problem. Clearly the teacher has to engage these students immediately and involve them in the learning process – all within four weeks. I had to make some changes.

In the first class last year, everyone – including me – made an 8 1/2" x 11" name plate, to "re-individualize" the large class environment. The teasing, reasoning, and outright bullying I did in each class to persuade them to WEAR them, a subject of humour at the time, was later found neatly, if dryly, described in their text as *social influence techniques*. Students filled out self-administered personality questionnaires, so they could compare their own charac-

teristics with material in the text. And we had an in-class dramatization. Rather than lecture on sexual assault, I got four student volunteers to play the parts of a victim and the lawyers from a transcript of a real Halifax court case. As the Judge, I swore in the class as members of the jury, who voted guilty or not at the end of the session.

We had fun together; exam results improved; attendance and attention was good for each of the three sections; class evaluations soared – the students liked it. Their response confirmed for me that drawing them out of their seats and into the subject matter is a key element in "connected teaching." For me, the risk of failing was far less threatening than the certainty of repeating my experiences of the previous year with "detached" students.

Professor Ed Renner
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Affirmative Action

In the fall term this past year I taught Engineering 1100A, Graphics; the enrolment was 177 students. The course included three equal-sized lab sections, which I also taught.

The final examination contained an essay question: students were required to write one page on any one of several topics which had been briefly introduced periodically throughout the term.

About midway through the term, in each lab session, I distributed the pamphlet **What is Employment Equity**, created by Mayann Francis, Dalhousie's Employment Equity Officer. I made some brief comments, then tried to create some discussion on the topic *Is affirmative action necessary to overcome systemic discrimination against women in the profes-*

sion of engineering? I would rate the quality of discussion as weak, but this is not surprising given the relatively large number of students in each lab (about 60) and the lab space (students sitting in rows at tables).

Interestingly, about half the students chose to answer this particular topic in the final examination – it was by far the most "popular" topic. I could sense that most students who answered had an emotional attachment to the question. However, the essays were not generally well argued.

I would like to see these same students address the same question again, perhaps in their senior year, and in a setting where serious, informed debate amongst students can take place.

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