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Improving Classroom Climate for Women: The Faculty Developer's Role

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, I observed an active interchange between professor and students in a large biology class. It was the kind of activity in which students contributed much and one that ordinarily would be viewed as a productive learning situation. However, in recording responses made to each student's comments, I became aware of a very subtle influence which the professor was inadvertently using with female students. Incorrect answers received a "no" response only when a female student had responded. Other techniques were used to discuss the merits of male student responses that were incorrect. I also observed that women students constituted about half the class, yet they contributed much less than half of the student talk. Nonetheless, the professor reported that the female students, as a group, performed appreciably better on tests than did the male students. Women did have something to contribute. This professor expressed interest in supporting women students and "socializing" them into the field of biological sciences,

but his habits of response communicated something different.

This example suggests a need for examination of classroom behaviors to identify inequities in the treatment of women students. Very subtle behaviors may seem so "normal" that specific teaching behaviors which express them go unnoticed, but women students are left feeling less confident about their abilities and about their places in academic pursuits.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Twenty years ago, women students comprised a minority population in colleges and universities. Today, they more frequently make up over half of the student group. This shift requires a reexamination of how faculty work with this new majority. Studies report that women students, regardless of interest and aptitude, are not staying in such traditionally male-dominated courses of study as science (Gappa & Pearce, 1985). Other research suggests that "in selecting and reacting to educational environments, females tend, more than males, to be attuned to the personal supportiveness of these environments" (Hall & Sandler, 1982, p. 2). These factors support the need to examine the classroom climate for women.

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?

In the 1983 volume of *To Improve the Academy*, Susanne and David Whitcomb described many efforts in higher education institutions to address equity issues for women faculty and administrators. The strategies they outlined can improve the environment of the institution and thereby provide a positive context for student equity.

In 1982, the Association of American Colleges' (AAC) Project on the Status of Women published a report, on the "chilly classroom climate" for women (Hall & Sandler). It described common inequities in college classrooms and provided suggestions for faculty who want to encourage

full participation. Real-life examples from testimony of women students on a large number of campuses were listed in their study of learning conditions for women.

The purposes of this paper are to provide information about the kinds of inequity which women experience in the college classrooms, to describe ways faculty developers can respond to this problem, and to report results of experiences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on this issue.

TYPES OF INEQUITIES FOR WOMEN STUDENTS

Developing a clear idea of the kinds of behaviors which result in an inequitable learning environment is the first step in determining how to respond. The following outline provides some examples from the instructional environment. These are reported in more detail in the ACC report (Hall & Sandler, 1982).

A. Reinforcing invisibility

- Ignoring women students while recognizing men students, even when women clearly volunteer to participate.

- Calling directly on men students but not on women students.

- Calling men students by name more often than women students.

- Addressing the class, as if no women were present.

B. Communicating different expectations

- "Coaching" men but not women students in working toward a fuller answer by probing for additional elaboration or explanation.

- Waiting longer for men than for women to answer a question before going on to another student.

- Interrupting women students or disproportionately allowing interruptions by peers.

- Asking women students questions that require factual answers while asking men questions that demand personal evaluation and critical thinking (higher order questions).

—Responding more extensively to men's comments than to women's comments.

—Crediting men's comments to their "author" ("... as Bill pointed out") but not giving authorship to women's comments.

—Making seemingly helpful comments which imply that women are not as competent as men.

—Phrasing classroom examples in a way which reinforces a stereotyped and negative view of women's psychological traits?; i.e., "typically weak and irrational".

—Using examples that reflect stereotyped ideas about men's and women's social and professional roles; i.e., the scientist, doctor, or accountant is "he" while the lab assistant, patient, or secretary is "she".

—Using the generic "he" or "man" to refer to both men and women.

—Reacting to comments or questions articulated in a "feminine style" as inherently of less value than those stated in a "masculine style"; i.e., a woman who is hesitant, uses questioning intonation and is overly polite.

C. Nonverbal cue differences

—Making eye contact more often with men than with women.

—Nodding and gesturing more often in response to men's questions and comments than to women's.

—Modulating tone of voice when speaking to women.

—Assuming a posture of attentiveness when men speak, but the opposite when women make comments.

—Habitually choosing a location near men students.

—Excluding women from course-related activities; i.e., field trips.

—Grouping students according to sex in a way which implies less competence.

—Favoring men in choosing student assistants.

—Giving men detailed instructions with the expectation they will succeed, but doing the assignment for women or allowing them to fail with less instruction.

- Allowing women to be physically “squeezed out” from viewing a demonstration.
- Making direct sexual overtures.

D. Discriminatory comments

- Comments that disparage women in general; i.e., “busy-body.”
- Comments that disparage women’s intellectual abilities; e.g., math.
- Comments that disparage women’s seriousness and/or academic commitment; i.e., “You’re so cute, I can’t see you as a professor.”
- Comments that divert discussion of a woman’s work toward a discussion of her physical attributes.
- Comments about women faculty that define them in terms of their sex rather than their professional status or professional accomplishments.
- Comments that refer to males as “men” but to females as “girls”, “gals”, etc., rather than “women.”
- Comments that rely on sexist humor as a classroom device.
- Comments that disparage the scholarship, perceptions, or feelings of women.

E. Career counseling differences

- Counseling women to lower their aspirations and/or to switch from a “harder” to a “softer” subspeciality.
- Organizing assistantships so men have more responsibility and/or greater opportunity than do women.
- Spontaneously offering to write letters of support for men students, but not for equally competent women students.
- Nominating men, but not equally competent women, for fellowships, awards and prizes.
- Forming more “apprenticeship” or “protege” relationships with men than women.
- Providing women with formal, but not informal, feedback on the quality of their work.
- Inviting only men graduate students to share authorships, make professional trips and meet recognized scholars.

ROLE OF THE FACULTY DEVELOPER

Most faculty want to treat students fairly and to recognize individual talents and abilities. However, they may be unaware of the patterns of behavior described above. The subtlety of these behaviors may lead individual women students to feel and behave as if they were marginal participants without even knowing why they felt that way.

Faculty developers must be aware of the ways in which inequitable behavior is expressed. Once those are known, programs and materials can be designed to respond to this problem. When planning responses to such behaviors, however, it is important to note the concern expressed by the Whitcombs: confronting inequities in higher education may result in

. . . a polarization of opinion, a trivialization of issues as 'pertaining to women,' and adversarial stances which block understanding, communication, attitude change, and action. It is not enough to open doors, for admittance to a warped organization may mean only that a greater variety of humans will be punished or injured by that organization's responses. (1983, p. 59)

Because women now constitute a majority of college students, faculty developers need to design programs to help faculty reduce the possibility of punishment or injury by thoughtless responses.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

The following activities are representative of program elements which can address this instructional problem.

- A. Workshops can be planned to provide practice for faculty in identifying inequitable behavior, planning alternative behavior, and clarifying pertinent personal values. Video- or audio-recorded examples, as well as scripted classroom dialogue, can be helpful in exercises to analyze inequitable behaviors. Role-playing allows practice in implementing new behaviors.
- B. Newsletters can provide information to increase

awareness and reflection on this topic. Many times, awareness alone can result in a behavior change. In addition to information, newsletters might include questions faculty can ask themselves regarding equity and detailed examples of inequities which can happen in the classroom. The student statements described in the ACC paper (Hall & Sandler, 1982) can provide excellent testimony to the existence of a problem which is pervasive in higher education. Wright (1983) provides an example of a newsletter devoted to such issues.

- C. Student surveys to help faculty assess student perceptions in their own classes can be developed. Faculty might assign research projects to collect local data. The *Student Perception Questionnaire* (Gappa & Pearce, 1982) is an example of a useful instrument.
- D. Material which provides detailed information can be made available to faculty willing to learn more about the problem. The Self-Check Quiz in the Appendix might be used to encourage introspection.
- E. Classroom observation by a faculty developer or a colleague using a checklist of behaviors could address the following kinds of questions:
 - 1. What is the ratio of males to females called on to answer questions, make comments, or participate in some other way?
 - 2. If interruptions occur when an individual is talking, who interrupts and who is interrupted?
 - 3. Is the verbal response to men compared to women students positive, negative, encouraging?
 - 4. What non-verbal responses, such as wait time, posture, gestures, eye contact, etc., are made to men and to women?
 - 5. What discriminatory comments are made?
- F. Audio or video recordings of class sessions can provide powerful feedback to faculty members. In addition to the behaviors listed above, the observer might address the following:
 - 1. Which students do you call by name?

2. Are examples and anecdotes drawn from men's lives only?
3. Can differential patterns of reinforcement be detected?
4. What language pattern are you using? Is there a regular use of male referencing? Do stereotypical assumptions about men and women occur in your classroom dialogue?

PROGRAMS TRIED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA—LINCOLN (UNL)

In an effort to bring attention to this instructional issue, the Teaching and Learning Center worked cooperatively with the UNL Chancellor's Commission on the Status of Women. Through their efforts, the Chancellor proclaimed 1982-1983 the "Year of the Learning Environment" at UNL. The Commission further designated a month as a time to examine the climate for women on the UNL campus. Twenty-one events, sponsored by fourteen campus organizations, targeted this topic for their programs in February; office personnel, administrators, undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty were seeing films, having panel discussions and workshops, and, in general, increasing their awareness of subtle behaviors discriminatory to women.

The Teaching and Learning Center was responsible for faculty programs, including the following:

- A. The February issue of *Teaching at UNL*, a faculty newsletter, featured a condensed version of "The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?" (Hall & Sandler, 1982), including suggested procedures for evaluating classroom climate by using tape recordings, surveys, or observational techniques with guiding questions and self-check quiz.
- B. During the same week, two sessions of a workshop entitled "Equity in the Classroom" were conducted by a team of two leaders: John Noonan, a member of the AAC Advisory Committee that generated the original

AAC report; and Natalie Porter, a psychology professor who had researched the behavior of women in groups. This workshop was designed to increase awareness about women in groups. The following activities were used:

- (1) Get-acquainted activity
 - (2) Presentation on the effect of non-verbal behaviors used by professors.
 - (3) Small group exercise addressing the "messages about women in our society" and how these affect students, faculty, and administrators, and how participants viewed differences in teaching women and men students. Shared ideas were discussed among the entire group.
 - (4) A videotaped discussion of women graduate students at UNL illustrated their experiences as students related to the AAC report. Discussion of various points occurred throughout the taped sequence.
 - (5) Using an audiotape and transcript of a professor/student interaction, participants practiced identifying biased behavior and suggesting desirable changes.
 - (6) Major ideas arising from the workshop were reviewed.
- C. A luncheon discussion open to all interested faculty was organized on the "Learning climate for women students."
- D. Individual consultation was offered to faculty participating in these programs.

Although no overall evaluation of the impact of these programs was conducted, the following results were observed:

- Ratings for workshops were strongly positive.
- Faculty were initially reluctant to believe that women were treated differently in the academic setting. This attitude shifted to "maybe it does occur" to "I'll do a self-check to see if I do these things." Women as well as men acknowledged recognition and increased awareness of behaviors they had not previously considered. Some suggested that these subtleties were not as

important as overt sexual harassment and that attention to that issue should come first. None asked for help in reviewing their behaviors, but most indicated their intentions to analyze themselves.

During the two year period following the "Chilly Climate" programs, TLC instructional consultants became more sensitive to observing behaviors demonstrating equitable treatment of women students. Enlightened faculty generally have awareness that unequal treatment occurs in their own classrooms. No conscientious faculty member wants to treat women students differently; therefore, feedback suggesting that they do is an extremely sensitive kind of consultation. Principles of good supervisory practice suggest that opportunities for the individual to "discover" this problem should be designed and that feedback should be descriptive and free from judgmental statements. Perhaps the consultant and client could agree before observation that an audio or video recording of class would be useful. The consultant and client could replay the tape and apply a descriptive instrument to record behaviors. A comparison of results should provide an opportunity to replay segments and clarify what was happening. Frequently, awareness is enough to change behavior, because most faculty already value equitable treatment.

A second effort to encourage faculty to maintain awareness of classroom equity was planned in March 1985. Again, efforts were coordinated with the UNL Chancellor's Commission on the Status of Women. Resource people were again brought in to work with various campus audiences, including faculty, administrators, graduate and undergraduate students.

Two faculty workshops were designed by Myra and David Sadker of American University to present research on equity in instructional settings and to train faculty to use an objective observation instrument that they could apply to their own classrooms. Skill in using the instrument was developed by practice with videotaped examples.

Again, the workshops were rated very positively by participants. Faculty attitudes expressed were no longer "Does this really exist?" but had changed to "How can

I recognize and change this behavior?"

The extent to which these activities can change the existing climate for women on a campus is yet to be seen. At the least, they represent a beginning awareness and a gradually evolving attitude about the faculty role in establishing an equitable climate for all.

CONCLUSIONS

Faculty instructional developers have a responsibility to address the problem of inequitable treatment of women in the college classroom. When a majority of the college population is female, the education of women becomes central to the postsecondary enterprise. Society cannot afford to have less than optimum use of the talents that educated women can bring to it. As faculty developers, we must find ways to help faculty provide a classroom climate which will provide equal opportunity for women to be successful.

APPENDIX

Self-Check Quiz

Circle the response which is most accurate for you in your classes:

A = Always

F = Frequently

O = Occasionally

R = Rarely

N = Never

A F O R N

1. Are you less likely to call upon women students directly than men students?	1	2	3	4	5
2. Are you more likely to remember the names of men students than those of the women?	1	2	3	4	5
3. Are you as likely to choose women as men for student assistants and to give them the same responsibilities?	1	2	3	4	5
4. Are you more likely to contact men graduate students when publication, research and other professional opportunities arise?	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX (Continued)

	A	F	O	R	N
5. Do you tend to ask women and men students the same kinds of questions?	1	2	3	4	5
6. Do you encourage women as much as men to think for themselves?	1	2	3	4	5
7. Do you give women students as much informal feedback, encouragement or praise as men for their academic efforts?	1	2	3	4	5
8. Do you interrupt women more often than men during class discussion?	1	2	3	4	5
9. Do you listen seriously to views of women as well as of men?	1	2	3	4	5
10. Do you tend to make more eye-contact with men when asking a question of the whole class, thus "recognizing" men and inviting responses from them?	1	2	3	4	5
11. Do you assume that women students are uncertain about what they want to say because women may tend to state their classroom comments hesitantly or in "overly polite" fashion?	1	2	3	4	5
12. Do you discourage women from enrolling in traditionally "masculine" majors or from the "harder" subspecialties?	1	2	3	4	5
13. Do you use sexist humor to "spice up a dull subject" or make disparaging comments about women as a group?	1	2	3	4	5

Scoring: Total the numbers you have circled and check your level of behavior.

- 13-25 You are living in the past and are in critical condition; waste no time; begin today to correct your ways.
- 26-38 Collect some observational data; you need improvement.
- 39-51 Your intentions are good; keep working at equal considerations.
- 52-59 You are obviously aware and approaching excellence.
- 60-65 You are exceptional; keep up the good work!!!

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