On Teaching and Learning

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On Teaching and Learning publishes articles and essays on aspects of pedagogical practice and on research that has implications for teaching.

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makes no sense to accommodate climbers by lowering the mountain, or flying them to the summit. The obstacles must be faced.

This essentially Darwinian view of the classroom, in which the fittest survive and the less fit retire, is flawed in at least two respects. First, it confuses the difficulties inherent in a particular subject matter with the difficulties created by the learning environment and the manner in which the subject is taught. A difficult subject that is well taught may be learned more easily than a less challenging subject that is poorly taught. Secondly, there is an assumption that those who do well under the “Darwinian” model have actually “survived,” learned the subject, understood the crux of the matter, or come away richer in intellect than when they went in. But performing the technology of a subject is not the same as engagement — the understanding of a subject. Knowing the right answers is not the same as knowing why they are right, or why other answers may also be right.

All of our authors are engaged in the meaning, definition and redefinition of academic excellence. None is satisfied that passive, mechanical, uncritical learning is a key to such excellence. Each, in her or his own way, speaks of academic excellence as involving, in Brendan Maher’s words, “accumulated knowledge, the intellectual skills and discernment necessary to analyze the bases of this knowledge, and to contribute to the acquisition of new knowledge; the recognition of the importance of values; and the skills necessary to communicate all of this to others.” At the same time, each suggests that the emotional climate of the classroom is directly related to the attainment of academic excellence, however defined. Students’ feelings about what they experience in class — whether of inclusion or exclusion, mastery or inadequacy, support or hostility — cannot be divorced from what and how well they learn. While not all our contributors agree on the specific ways to achieve what Pat Rogers describes as “the engagement of students within the classroom in purposeful, meaningful activity,” that remains their common goal.

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Piranhas, Monsters, and Jugglers: The Psychology of Gender and Academic Discourse

Jane Margolis

Often, in restaurants or walking through Harvard Yard, I overhear women talking to each other about their difficulties speaking in class. In trying to understand the difficulties, each of the women seems to know that her experience is part of a larger picture, and each seems to doubt herself: too much sensitivity, too much emotion, too nervous, lacking in confidence, or “I just don’t think the same way they do.”

Talk is a central activity of the classroom. My research investigated how women experience speaking in academic settings. I listened to the students’ themes, garnered their images and recorded their words. I questioned why women students feel uncomfortable, how their experiences differ from men’s. I attempted to look beyond the emphasis on procedural solutions to guarantee women equal speaking time. While these procedural changes are very important, I feel they do not address a deeper sense of alienation and dissonance felt by many women in the college classroom.

In this article I discuss my findings. They are based on data collected from men and women undergraduates in the Harvard Government Department. Previous studies have shown the classroom environment to be a chilly one for women, with female students talking less frequently in class, for shorter periods of time, and with male students interrupting more (Hall, 1982; Krupnick, 1985). The findings of my study point to the language of the classroom, the nature of academic discourse, and its contribution to women's discomfort with speaking in class.

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My inquiry into the relationship of language to women's experiences in classroom discussions was originally inspired by feminist poet and teacher, Adrienne Rich. In her article “Taking Women Students Seriously” (1979), Rich says, “Listen to a woman groping for a 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 thought to the dimensions of a discourse not intended for her” (p. 244).

What are the terms of academic discourse and how are they “not intended for her”?

Academic Discourse

The verbal and written “voices” of intellectual scholarship (academic discourse), are associated with being educated in this society. Academic discourse is often described as competitive and acrimonious. In Writing for Social Scientists (1987), Becker describes the personae which academic writers adopt as distanced, and passive yet authoritative. Becker sees the purpose of the passive voice as a way to “conceal any traces of the ordinary human activity which produced their results” (p. 36). Similarly, feminist scholar Elizabeth Fee refers to scientific authority as “a disembodied knowledge that cannot be questioned, whose author is inaccessible” (1981, p. 19). Adrienne Rich quotes a communication with a Welsh psychology professor who says, “It seems to me that the form of many communications in academia, both written and verbal, is such as not only to obscure the influence of the personal or subjective but also to give the impression of divine origin — a mystification composed of sibylline statements supposedly emptied of the ‘dross’ of the self” (1979, p. 144). Coining the phrase “to overcome the academic prose, you must first overcome the academic pose,” sociologist C. W. Mills viewed academic discourse as part of the intelligentsia’s attempt to maintain an elite status (1959, p. 218-19). Along these same lines, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1975) describes academic discourse as a “conventional tournament” in which there are winners and losers; and finally Robin Lakoff, in her book Talking Power (1990) writes: “Academic discourse is hard to understand, thus increasing its users’ hierarchical power, at the expense of those struggling to interpret it. Intentional unintelligibility has always been a potent weapon of those seeking to attain and maintain power. The discourse style of academe, whether in writing, the classroom, or the meeting, is one of floor-holding, not collaborative reciprocity. This too is characteristically male” (p. 147).

Proponents of academic discourse often argue that the detached, distanced and impersonal character of the language is necessary in order to retain the objectivity of ideas and guard against intrusions of the self and accompanying prejudices and biases.4 I concur that language is a critical deterrent to ideological “fact finding.” My concern is general, having to do with which voices and ideas are amplified, and which become muted by the distanced and detached terms of academic discourse. Do the terms of academic discourse implicitly devalue women’s contributions? What parameters are set by academic discourse, and which cultural interpretations are promoted and which are silenced? How is academic discourse “not intended for her”?

My conclusions point to a conflict between academic discourse and women’s and other marginalized groups’ social reality, a devaluation of the knowledge that comes from the “outsiders” perspective and from senses beyond the mind — including the heart and the body.

“Gov Talk”

The data for my study was collected from twenty-four in-depth, semi-structured interviews (twelve with women and twelve with men) which focused on students’ experiences of talking in class. The students were all Harvard Government Department5 juniors and the sample included students from varied ethnic and social class backgrounds (fourteen Caucasians, seven African-Americans, two Hispanics, and one
The questions were worded to elicit students’ self-reflections about their actual speaking experiences, as distinct from generalizations and abstract speculations. Both women and men characterized the talk in the Government classroom similarly, referring to “Gov Talk” as adversarial and competitive. Elizabeth said: “I feel when I go into class that I know what I’m coming up against — people trying to destroy my thought. . . .” Students refer to “tearing into each others’ arguments.” While faculty may not have this in mind, students believe that when they speak they must take a stand, and speak only to express what they want to learn. “Gov Talk” is authoritative, absolute, and revealing of no weaknesses or doubts. Feelings ranged from Bob and Kate enjoying the style, to Rosemary “feeling like a crazed woman” when she left class.

Differences Between Women and Men

While there was considerable consensus about the nature of “Gov Talk,” women and men voiced distinctly different concerns. Eight out of twelve women answered the first interview question, “When you listen to yourself speak in class, what do you hear?” with answers located in relationship. Their frames of reference had to do with other people; for instance, 1) concern with including others in the conversation, 2) not wanting to hurt other people’s feelings, and 3) wanting to be understood by others. Mary said: “I’ll try to make a couple of points and then . . . refer to someone else, and use hand motions, and try to be inclusive.” Louise said: “I’m genuinely interested in what the professor will say or how other students might respond to a comment.” Laurie said: “In tutorial, you’re juggling a lot of thoughts. You have to think about the other people. You’re thinking about what they’re thinking. I always watch eyes, so I’m paying attention to what’s going on. I mean, there are lots of social interactions and you just have to pay a lot of attention.” This attention to the interpersonal led a number of women to prefer that ground rules be set at the beginning of the discussions. Mary said:

Sometimes I just wish I knew people in my section better or that we could all get an understanding before. I like it when the section leader lays down ground rules on how we should interact, how we are supposed to respect each others’ answers. I think it is as important as just sitting down and starting to talk about a subject.

In contrast, when male students answered the same question, “When you listen to yourself speak in class, what do you hear?” an inclusion of other people and relational concerns was not woven throughout their remarks. Their position was, in general, much more solitary. For example, Steve said: “What I hopefully think I’m doing is adding something that was hidden away in the reading or which I interpreted myself. I make an effort not to just repeat what I think they’ve been spoon-feeding us in class, because I think a lot of that goes on.”

Seven out of twelve men’s responses to the question did not mention other people at all. The men’s experience of talking in class took on the character of a competitive monologue; of the five men who did mention other people, all presented those people as adversaries or competitors. Richard said: “I don’t tend to take on people who obviously know a lot more than I do.” Chris said: “Often you say what you have to say, and then someone attacks or questions, or brings up another point in opposition to what you say.”

Five of the women, as opposed to two of the men, voiced an active dislike for classroom debate. The men who spoke of liking debate described it as a challenge; they enjoyed the “intellectual exercise.” The women felt that debate tended to simplify complicated things “that do not wrap up nicely and neatly,” and they worried about hurting other people’s feelings, not doing it well, and not seeing a purpose to it. This was as true of women who felt very comfortable in class as those who did not. Jean, who was comfortable and described herself as a “politics junkie,” said: “I’m not great at arguing with people I don’t know as well, like in a classroom argument. I don’t think I’d be very good, unless I saw a real purpose to it. But just for the intellectual exercise, I think I would
shy away from it." Bob, on the other hand, whose remarks typified many of the men's comments, said: "I think that I like the challenge of analyzing an argument, tearing it apart to see the points of view, and going to another level with people to defend their criticisms from an attacker. It's just a fun mental process."

This is not to say that all of the women had other people's feelings foremost in their concerns, or that all women students rejected "Gov Talk." Two women students, in particular, were very frank about their willingness to speak "Gov Talk." Louise said: "If people want to get down and dirty with me I can go the distance with just about anybody. I mean, there are times when I know I crucify people in class, because I just get tired of listening to them." Katherine said: "I'm an assertive person. I'm an aggressive person — forget assertive. So Government is good for me." She added: "I try and make a specific effort to bring other people in and to make other people feel comfortable, but if someone's going to be an academic piranha, I will bite back just as hard. And in the Government Department, it happens all the time, so you get a chance to bite more often."

Joining the Procession

In the best-selling book, You Just Don't Understand (1990), linguist Deborah Tannen describes men's speech as more hierarchical, with conversations taking on the character of a contest and one-upmanship, whereas women's speech aims at forming connections, with conversation as negotiation for relationships and closeness. The function of women's speech is more for community, intimacy and friendship, than for power and status (p. 30). Research from all women's speaking groups has concluded that women's speech is interactive, relational, participatory and collaborative. This manifests itself in a greater use of inclusive pronouns and phrases, more ongoing reinforcement of the other speakers, more concern that all group members have a chance to speak, and utterances that build upon or elaborate previous speakers (Thorne and Henly, 1963; Treichler and Kramarae, 1983). Linguist McConnell-Ginet (1982) suggests that the picture emerging from the research is one in which "women in our own society tend to orient towards conversation as a cooperative enterprise, as a mutually-constructed product for common interest" (p. 10). Carol Gilligan (1982), in her studies of women's psychological development, identifies women's thinking and the verbal expression of that thinking as contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract (p. 22).

Considering these gender differences in "voice," the norms and standards of talk in the ivory tower are more hospitable to men's speech preferences (Treichler and Kramarae, 1983). Virginia Woolf in the essay "A Room of One's Own" poses an overarching question for women when she asks what it means for women to "join the procession of educated men"? What are the consequences for a woman who enters a public world that has been shaped by androcentric norms, values and standards? Do women try to assimilate, beat them at their own game, or do they effect a transformation? This dilemma directly confronts women in academia.

"Switching Voices"

Five of the women I interviewed talked about adapting to the style of discourse typical of "Gov Talk." Mary said, "I've gotten used to it," and Katherine said, "You sort of have to lie. . . you have to learn to come down on one side or the other. . . and if you are going to succeed in the academic world, then you have to do it the way the academics do it." It was the women who perceived themselves as adapting their talk and changing their natural voices, who experienced the greatest difficulty and tension in classroom discussions. Rosemary is an example: "More and more I find myself becoming like the others to get along. I say what I feel is important in a way that they will [be able to] receive. . . I feel that in some ways it's not who I am to be this combative, aggressive person, and I don't like it. . . . I've caught myself being a way that I don't want to be, and I don't like having to feel that I have to change who I
am and the way I speak in order to have people receive my ideas." At the same time, Rosemary also discussed feeling some benefits: "I've found that it is a benefit to be able to speak assertively, and it's not always a bad thing." The reason Rosemary said she concentrated in Government was to show herself and others that she could, in every way, talk about government and any other thing she wanted on the same level as men. Even though it was Rosemary who described herself as walking out of class like a crazed woman, she wants to succeed and has found herself changing the way she talks in class to conform to the existing standard.

Robin described another aspect of "switching voices." When Robin heard herself talking "Gov Talk," she sadly reflected, "What a monster I am becoming." These women expressed both a sense of mastery and accomplishment at surviving the male world and at the same time the sense of a violation of themselves, and an abandonment of their preferences and their peers.

Men's Voices — The Picture of Confidence

In contrast to women's relational concerns, and their dilemma of transforming or confronting the existing standards, the primary concern of the male students was self-confidence. Men talked about needing to look like they had it all together and sounding like they knew what they were talking about. This took varying degrees of effort, and the effort was variously successful. Larry said: "It takes a lot of work to get across what I want to say in class," and Rich said: "Talk comes out more confused than it is in my head." One difference between the men's and the women's narratives seemed to be that the men were not battling sexist notions that automatically denigrated their talk. They were not worried, as was Marie, about looking like "a ditz; a bitch and a feminist." All the women were in some degree worried about this, but the male students did not feel they had a disapproving audience which could make them doubt themselves because they were male. None of the males denigrated themselves or devalued their thoughts as simplistic, self-evident, or obvious, as did the women. None of the men talked about losing confidence half way into their statements because of the facial grimaces and slouched body postures that greeted their remarks.

Along with a more removed and distant tone to the men's remarks (noted even in the high number of third person referents when discussing their own experiences), a central difference between the men and the women was that the men students did not talk about "switching voices," juggling from one voice to another. The men did not feel that they had to change who they were or worry about who they were becoming. The men students did not feel a gulf between their sense of self and the selves they had to become in order to fit into the Government Department classroom discussions. They did not silence their preferred speaking style in order to gain entrance. Does this mean that the men students were more confident than the women students? Not necessarily. The apparent confidence of their responses may speak more to a culture that requires them to silence their uncertainty than to a true inner sense of confidence.

Emotions Devalued

In my interviews with the women students, feelings were much more apparent than with the men. I was aware of their feelings in their expressive body language and their facial expressions, among other things. And I also noted their language. Seven out of twelve of the women, in answer to the first question about what they heard when they spoke, answered with what they felt. Women tended to answer with "I feel."

A central tenet of rigorous academic discourse is that "personal" concerns (such as worrying about the dynamics between classmates) and emotions (what one feels) must be separated out from intellectual thought. Emotions are suspected of subverting rather than informing the intellect. A serious scholar is somehow supposed to be liberated from emotional interference. Both the men and women in my study
wrestled with this tension. Bill observed: “I like to think that when I say something, I’ve really thought about it, and gone through the thought process, and it’s not just a feeling I have. I don’t think that an emotional response is valued as highly as a mind or intellectual type answer.” Margery said: “If there is something that really gets you going, and it’s in the academic framework, you can’t just come off with ‘but this is what I feel.’ You have to present it in some cogent, intellectual kind of reasoned way. Just feeling isn’t enough. You need a reason for it…”

While both the men and the women worked to contain or silence their emotions while speaking in class, feelings remained more central for the women. Listen as Katherine describes her struggle to silence her feelings:

I’d say that my heart and mind are fighting against each other... I mean, there’s a part of me that says you should be rational... like the emotion is for something else, and that you should keep it totally separate when you’re dealing with formal situations, where you should be a rational being.

Nevertheless, she concluded with:

You can’t abort the emotional part... so I’d say it’s always like struggling.

Women’s social and intellectual reality involves an emotional awareness of others, a self-in-relation and an interdependent orientation. But according to detached, rational and objective notions of academic discourse, a source of knowledge born of the interconnection between mind, heart, and body is questionable at best. Emotion and human connection (experienced knowledge) are disparaged as a basis for understanding the complexities and ambiguities of life. Students are expected to distance themselves from “subject” and abstract their language and their thought. The questions and voices of feeling associated with the female agenda are given less credence and less respect, and are often regarded as inappropriate, as “touchy-feely” or “not serious scholarship.”

Detached Discussion on War

The silencing effect of distant and detached language can be illustrated by Robin’s description of a classroom discussion on the Vietnam War. Robin, a very competent editor of a student international affairs journal, found herself engaged in a classroom discussion which centered on strategic arms agreements, treaties etc. Her contributions in this discussion were snickered at, and she was made to feel foolish. After she remarked that her central concern about the Vietnam War was not agreements and treaties, but the loss of lives, she was accused of emotionalism.

I think people believe that ideally you shouldn’t get emotional about these things, and ideally you should deal with the war in a very rational, level-headed, and analytical way. You shouldn’t get carried away by the fact that millions of people were killed. Especially in some of these big international relations courses, it’s amazing how detached people can become from the fact that we are talking about millions of lives here. And when you try and point this out, sometimes people think that you are not being realistic and “It’s just the way life is,” which is weird.

When Robin placed human concerns in the center of her discourse she was made to feel “soft” and silly. When she spoke outside the rules, she was accused of not being realistic. Her concerns were invalidated by the detached terms of academic discourse which rob reality of its fuller context, and spring politics free from the constraints of moral judgments and limitations. The academic language considered appropriate for a class on international relations is one from which mangled napalmed bodies have been excised, sanitized away. Someone who speaks of mothers holding babies and looking up at GI’s, pleading for mercy, is made to feel simple-minded.

Feminist thinkers identify one of the central problems of our dominant culture as dissociation from the human, and it is this quality which permeates academic discourse. Jean Baker Miller notes that “women’s actual practice in the real world and the complex processes which these practices entail have not been drawn upon, nor elaborated on, as a basis of
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Feminist scholars are attempting to bridge the dichotomy of intellect and emotion, arguing that "it is necessary to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and construct conceptual models that demonstrate the mutually constitutive rather than the oppositional relation between reason and emotion" (Jaggar, p. 156-157). Instead of an intellectual model requiring a split in the human experience, these theorists propose an alternative of "connected" knowing based on honoring multiple modes of knowledge. If the discourse of scholarship and public arenas such as government, law, and business conflict with women's sense of reality, self and the world, then language will continue to be an active factor in women's exclusion from such arenas.

Dominant Discourse

Language is reflective of the norms, values and standards of the dominant culture. Linguist Dale Spender (1980) discusses how the dominant group evolves speaking registers which support their dominance, and which are not consonant with women's experiences. Considering the meaning and form of public discourse she examines the different speaking styles with which men and women seem to be comfortable, and shows how the public registers are built upon men's speaking styles, with a rejection of the styles of women. For instance, the high value placed on authoritative and unemotional speech has forced women either to be silent or to change their style (p. 78). Changing style is a step which men do not have to take in order to be heard. Women are confronted in the public arena with the "male encoded registers," and the necessity of dealing with them.

Political scientist Jean Elshtain, in her article "Feminist Discourse and Its Discontents: Language, Power and Meaning" (1982), discusses the points at which language and thought meet. She examines the vocabulary and language of political science to show how it has historically silenced the voices of women, excluding women's moral sensibilities part-

ly by branding as inappropriate those descriptions which make reference to such things as affection, love, compassion, and kindness. In their place are substituted non-emotive abstractions such as "human appetites and aversions." Elshtain shows how these words distance and place limits on thinking. By using words which are drained of their emotional significance, the full dimensions of an issue or question are not available for consideration. Her position is that feminists must stand firm against accusations of being "too emotional" or "too sentimental" in their language, accusations which exile both women and emotions to the private world.

Language Perpetuates Dominance — Black and White Objectivity

My work in the Harvard Government Department can be extended to show how norms of detachment and distance can contribute to marginalizing not just the voices of women, but also the voices of African-American students, both male and female. In his book Black and White Styles in Conflict (1981), Thomas Kochman looks at the speaking norms of the college classroom, the ways in which black and white cultures affect students' attitudes toward classroom discussion and their relation to the subject material. Kochman describes black culture as one which "values spontaneous expression of feeling," and encourages intensity of expression as a mark of conviction and earnestness. This is in contrast to the white (and, I add, middle-class and male) culture, which "values the ability of individuals to rein in their impulses" (Kochman, p.30). In the Harvard classroom, where white, upper-middle class speaking norms are dominant, the majority of students sense the value placed on the lack of intensity and passion in the search for so-called "objective truth."

Kochman also speculates that "it is possible that those who have succeeded in separating thought from feeling are able to do so only when they have nothing at stake" (p.41). This might be illustrated by Henry, an African-American student, who said of his difficulties speaking in class:
You don't want to come in with a chip on your shoulder. Being black, I already know [about] the obvious grading issues, and you don't want to become emotional. . . you want to be as objective as possible. There've been a couple of times when someone would say something and . . . just like 'Wait a minute!' you feel the obligation to get the story straight. I'm not a and I haven't gone into endless studies on what it means to be black in America, or black at Harvard. I only know my experience . . . [and] what my friends tell me. But it seems to keep coming out this way . . . you want to be as scientific as possible.

Throughout the interview Henry shadow boxes with the "objective and scientific way of thinking." In the Harvard classroom the "scientific and objective" world view of the dominant white, male, upper-middle class culture easily becomes the de facto standard against which all other perspectives are judged. Yet, Henry clearly has a different side of the story than the one allowed in class. "Objective" excludes Henry's experiences. Henry believes that if he tells his life story he will be accused of being subjective and biased. He continues:

I had a Junior seminar, and I found myself talking about blacks in the third person, as if I wasn't black, and that kind of disturbed me . . . and the students kind of looked at me... real blank stare, like 'what are you saying?' . . . The point I was trying to make, I felt emotional about it, but I wanted to keep it in an objective sense. But it didn't make the [point] clear, [the] objective terms, [the] scientific terms. . . . It didn't make the impact that I wanted.

In order to be listened to, Henry tried to master the "scientific, cold, reflective way of thinking about things." In doing so Henry falsified his own experiences, denied who he was, muzzled and silenced his own reality, opinions, thoughts and self.

The African-American women in my study broadened my frame of reference on the subject of women's talking in class. Margaret considered "Gov Talk" in the context of her life in a racist society, an experience which has left her with few illusions about equality. Feeling "attacked by so many things," surviving a classroom discussion was just one of the daily obstacles she had to face. Several African-American students described "detaching" from classroom discussions, especially those about race, because their own world view conflicted so dramatically with the world view of the rest of the class. Yet, acutely aware of their outsider voice, the African-American women students (as compared to a number of the white women who seemed to be hitting a "glass ceiling" for the first time) exhibited what Clevonne Turner (1984) calls a "learned talent to survive." This talent involves a "mental gymnastics, occurring on a daily basis, of decoding which type of discrimination lies behind which interaction, and then deciding whether to respond, how to respond or being too overcome by strong feelings to respond at all" (p.4).

While these black women projected tremendous strength which they attributed to sources outside of Harvard (their church, family and home communities), when the clash of world realities in the classroom was not explicitly addressed, silence was often the result.

Male-voiced Education

Today most educators acknowledge the importance of creating a climate in the classroom which encourages critical thinking, and one in which women and minorities can fully participate. Many of the ways in which students are denied equal speaking time are more obvious than the relatively invisible ways in which the language of the classroom excludes and silences. While procedural methods to assure that women and minority students are given equal airtime in class are very important, they may not address a deeper problem.

Women and men students spend the first year in graduate school learning the particular language of their discipline, be it history, psychology, economics or computer science. Learning the language, for many, leads to a sense of satisfac-
tion and mastery. Yet, what are the subtle effects of a distanced and detached language? Which questions are amplified, which voices are muted?

Women and minority students face a dilemma. Learning the dominant language gives mastery, and is a valuable political tool, but learning this language is also transformative. It is worth our while to question, as we master Gov Talk, Econ Talk, Computer Talk, whether our thinking will change, and how. What thoughts get lost when African-American students and women abandon their own speech preferences? In contrast, what new thoughts could emerge from a multi-voiced classroom? What would a language be like that was no longer disembodied, separated from mind and heart? What new forms of knowledge could arise as a result?

One of the African-American students, Margaret, quietly and in detail, explained her journey through the language of academic life. Describing her own talk in Government class, she observed:

I don’t say words like love and God and, you know, passion . . . things like that in class . . . because I have a feeling that when you’re in school you should be trying to think of things in arenas . . . . So regardless of what you’re feeling, and regardless of what you consider important, you use the language.

Later in the interview Margaret pondered the significance of the language of political science that is so “removed from the people,” and discussed how when she does political work in the community, no one talks in the opaque manner they use in class or in political science journals. She cites the political science term “allocation of resources” and its meaning, “food, clothing and housing”; and the term “female heads of households,” namely mothers. Margaret presented an alternative view of Government which she described as:

[A] very feminine thing, if you think of it in terms of the roles in society. Government, especially in public policy, conceives and clothes and nurtures and builds. This is where Government should be, on the local level.

The distanced and detached language of political science reflects an ideology of government quite different from Margaret’s. There is a direct relationship between dissociated language and a distanced and detached government. To incorporate women’s ways of knowing, a new language is required. Women students have traditionally blamed themselves for feeling alienated and silenced in classroom discussions. This research provides an alternative perspective. Women students are studying and learning in a male-voiced society and are being trained to speak a language which is based on male values and styles of engagement, a language in which women’s values and styles of engagement are devalued. Women’s silence and discomfort is the result of the very language they are expected to speak. Adrienne Rich, in her writings on women’s education, describes the challenge of providing education for women students:

It is not easy to think like a woman in a man’s world, in the world of professions; yet the capacity to do that is a strength which we can try to help our students develop. To think like a woman in a man’s world means thinking critically, refusing to accept the givens, making connections between facts and ideas which men have left unconnected. It means remembering that every mind resides in a body; remaining accountable to the female bodies in which we live; constantly retesting given hypothesis against lived experience. It means a constant critique of language, for as Wittgenstein (no feminist) observed, “The limits of language are the limits of my world.” (1979, p.245).

As educators we must examine the messages which are perpetuated by our forms of discourse. Women’s studies classrooms based on collaborative learning, conversational patterns that women prefer and are good at, and elimination of the knower/non-knower, judge/judged hierarchies, are an attempt to bridge the canyon between women’s interconnected view of reality and the dissociated ways that dominate today’s traditional male-voiced academic classroom.
The experiences of women differ along racial, social class, sexual preference and other lines. But it is in the nature of society that the male/female difference has a tremendous impact. While I believe that the issues of race and gender are intricately interwoven when discussing speaking and silencing (addressed in the section "Language Perpetuates Dominance—Black and White Objectivity"), the focus of this research was the difference between male and female experiences in the college classroom.

I would encourage the reader who is interested in women's alienation in the college classroom to read Peggy McIntosh's article, "Feeling Like a Fraud." McIntosh discusses how hierarchical structures affect women's feelings in academia and other public life situations.

The Harvard Government Department was selected for my research following a 1989 Harvard Government Department Survey Study ("Gender and the Harvard Government Department: The Experiences and Concerns of Undergraduate Women," 1989) which found that women concentrators are more likely than men concentrators to feel uncomfortable in Government class discussions. I believed that in-depth interviews could explicate these findings. The 1989 study was initiated to "uncover the causes of the relative decline in the number of women concentrators and to understand how the Department can better meet the needs of the women" (p. 1).

In a correspondence, Harvard's Dean Brendan Maher responded to my critique of academic discourse. He wrote: "When the powerful individual is permitted to use personal experience as a test of the truth, the only reliable protection is the democracy of the scientific and scholarly methods... I think that academic discourse evolved with the rejection of the voice of authority (invariably male authority being rejected by other males) as the basis of knowledge, coincident with the rise of the empirical method."

The issue of whether the findings of this study are generalizable to other academic departments and universities should be discussed at this point. In terms of discourse standards, I believe that more similarities than differences exist between various academic departments. There is a technical language in the field of political science, as there is in all other professions and academic disciplines, but across the social sciences the style of academic discourse is broadly transferable from department to department. The writings by women scholars from a range of academic fields, including sociology, history, psychology, law, and the sciences (Aisenberg, 1988; Schuster and Van Dyne, 1985; Spender, 1981), confirm the experiences described by students in this study. What may distinguish the Government Department from other departments in the Arts and Sciences is the number of students who intend to go on to Law School, the Business School or into government itself. These professional tracks most likely have some effect on the nature of the discourse, and the findings may find resonance, as well, in the professions of law, business, and government.

Doing research at Harvard has both its pluses and minuses. I believe it is a plus that Harvard, as one of the most prestigious Ivy League colleges in the country, is influential in determining standards by which ideas should be judged, and the language in which they should be expressed. In a real sense the mode of discourse at Harvard sets standards for the rest of academia. Students arrive at Harvard having been creamed from the top of the scholastic pool. This generally means they are at a high level of verbal proficiency. How these students experience academic talk and how academic talk molds them as thinkers is an important subject of inquiry for educational research. A disadvantage of using a Harvard sample is that whereas my sample included students from varied ethnic and social class backgrounds, the dominant cultural context of Harvard is predominantly white and upper-middle class. Harvard's highly competitive environment, which clearly affects the students' talking experiences, may be extreme compared to other universities.

The principal questions students were asked were:

- When you listen to yourself speak in class, what do you hear?
- Can you describe a time when you wanted to speak in class, but didn't?
- Can you describe a time when you spoke in class and felt good about it?
- Can you describe a time when you spoke in class and regretted it?

The pathbreaking works of Carol Gilligan (1982), Jean Baker Miller (1976, 1984), Belenky et al. (1986), and Janet Surrey (1985), study the epistemology of knowledge through the lens of women's development and of self-in-relation to others. Gilligan observes that when women's experience is included in development, "the underlying epistemology correspondingly shifts from the Greek ideal of knowledge as a correspondence between mind and form to the Biblical conception of knowing as a process of human relationship" (1982, p. 173).

I am indebted to the writings of Jean Elshtain and Sara Ruddick in Jean Elshtain, eds. Women, Militarism and War (1988) which discuss the notion of "realism" in contemporary world politics.

Political scientist Lisa Disch, in a paper on political philosopher Hannah Arendt ("Dancing with Nonsense: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Judgement," 1988), discusses how Arendt, as an outsider, philosophically wrestled with the objective position. Arendt suggests that when we analyze phenomenon in a detached fashion, we often lose sight of the real relationship to the world. She argues that outrage may be more true to social reality and thus more objective than disinterest and detachment. Arendt concludes that, "If I describe these conditions without permitting my indignation to interfere, I have lifted this particular phenomenon out of its con-
text in human society and have thereby robbed it of part of its nature, deprived it of one of its important inherent qualities” (Arendt, 1953, p.78).

References


Feminist Pedagogy and the Construction of Knowledge: One Teacher's Experience
Frances A. Maher & Mary Kay Tetreault

Introduction

In this essay we want to illuminate, through the efforts of one English professor, how women's studies scholarship and women's experience can generate new pedagogies and processes of teaching in the college classroom. We will describe an aspect of a larger work in progress, an ethnographic study of classroom practices of eighteen feminist college teachers. The study itself analyzes what happens to teaching and learning when women's perspectives become central to the construction of knowledge.

The transformative impact of the last two decades of feminist scholarship on the academic disciplines and the college curriculum has been well documented (Boxer, 1982; DuBois, et al., 1985; Schmitz, 1985; Schuster and Van Dyne, 1985; Tetreault, 1985). Postmodern scholars, including many feminist theorists, argue that all knowledge is a social construction. From this perspective many traditional disciplines can be seen to reflect concerns and experiences of dominant groups in society, particularly privileged white males. At best they give us limited constructions, and at worst a discourse that silences or marginalizes other ways of knowing. Feminist scholars, on the other hand, call attention to legitimate constructions based on female experience, forms of knowledge obscured heretofore by false universals based on male experience (Alcoff, 1987; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Mascia-Lees, et al., 1989). These writers, along with other postmodern...