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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**Introduction**

*James Wilkinson and Helen Ansell*

Two years ago, in March of 1990, our center and Radcliffe College jointly sponsored a conference entitled “Gender and Learning: Improving the Harvard Classroom for Women and Men.” For a day at Agassiz House in the Radcliffe Yard, we listened to women students describe their experience as undergraduates, and to faculty exploring how other ways of knowing and learning could be sensitively accommodated in college teaching for the benefit of all. The unifying theme and a number of the articles in this issue of *On Teaching and Learning* are an outgrowth of the conference.

The topic “gender and learning” is broad and complex, some would say dauntingly so. However, in the articles presented here (as in the presentations at the conference) an area of particular concern and interest — active participation — emerges strongly and in intriguingly different forms. In an article published in the first issue of *On Teaching and Learning* in 1985, Catherine Krupnick pointed out a tendency for women to underparticipate when the classroom was male-dominated. Because they tend to withdraw from discussion when interrupted, and are either unable or unwilling to compete against men, female students become second class citizens in many discussion courses. Jane Margol is returns to this theme in the present issue with her article “Piranhas, Monsters, and Jugglers: The Psychology of Gender and Academic Discourse.” She draws links between women’s withdrawal from class discussion and what she sees as the alienating and essentially “male” language of typical academic discourse, which discourages women’s (and other “minorities”) voices and experiences.
The participation phenomenon, framed in terms of power and authority issues — who holds it and what is its nature, impersonal or personal — also lies at the heart of Frances A. Maher’s and Mary Kay Tetreault’s article “Feminist Pedagogy and the Construction of Knowledge: One Teacher’s Experience.” These authors discuss how a poetry class was transformed by giving students authority over agendas for discussion, and allowing students’ personal understandings and connections to illuminate the meaning of texts.

Brendan Maher’s article both complements and criticizes the Maher-Tetreault and the Margolis positions. In his “On Matters and Manners,” Maher argues that formal academic discourse is characterized not by cold inaccessibility, but by a necessary objectivity. The insistence on evidence and reasoned argument developed historically, and still functions ideally as a protection of ideas against personal “rightness” and personal agendas, and the tyrannies to which they can lead (historically the tyrannies of stronger and louder male voices over other males). Truth, he argues, is most fairly and surely arrived at through a discourse which in its “manner” is polite, and in its “matter” challenging.

Sara Rimm, Dana Markow and Marie Balaban, in “The Revision Process: A Tool for Conceptual Development” address participation as an issue of responsibility, full engagement and active collaboration with faculty. Their practical, hands-on article gives a model of participation which is not specifically gender-related but carries a number of the concerns found elsewhere in the issue — “voice,” personal authority, and the importance of independent critical thinking. The teacher who makes room for a more extended set of revisions within the structure of a course gives students a greater chance to discover what they truly wish to say and to judge how successfully they have said it.

David Layzer, in “Why Women (and Men) Give Up On Science,” asks why women turn away from the natural sciences earlier and in greater numbers than men, and suggests that they may, among other reasons, have a lower tolerance for the mechanical rote exercises and memorization which still often characterize current science teaching. What eager and creative mind, male or female, would not be discouraged from engaging in a science from which intuitive understanding, mind-play, uncertainty, history, and theory is culled out and reserved for the initiated and the experts? Similarly, Pat Rogers, in “Transforming Mathematics Pedagogy,” argues that the difficulty of women students of mathematics is linked to traditional methods of teaching the subject, and not to the nature of the subject itself. She sees traditional mathematics teaching as authoritarian, distant, and product-oriented. Her alternative model is a participatory classroom, where self-motivated students discuss, question, challenge the teacher, and collaborate and help one another through creative exercises and problems. She believes an engagement with mathematics that is not forced “from on high” increases both student satisfaction and genuine understanding of the material.

Arthur Loeb in his article “Turn Back, O Man, Forswear Thy Foolish Ways!” illuminates in a very short space, and in an engagingly personal way, the inclusion/exclusion, withdrawal/engagement themes. He draws on his own experience as an “outsider,” both in terms of culture and personality, to look at the stereotypes — intellectual, sexual, cultural — with which we live, and the unfortunate judgments upon one’s potential, worth and health, to which such stereotypes lead.

There is a school of thought which holds that making the classroom more hospitable for women (and for men who are uncomfortable in an overtly formal and competitive climate) means lowering academic standards. In this view the difficulties these students experience are created by their relative inexperience as learners and by the difficulty of the subject matter. Multivariable calculus, Hegel’s introduction to The Phenomenology of Mind, and the events of the American Civil War all challenge and ultimately engage students who make the effort and learn what must be learned. Like a difficult mountain climb, rewards are offered to those who muster the strength, skill, and endurance to make their way to the top.
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.

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.2

In this article I discuss my findings. They are based on data collected from men and women undergraduates in the Harvard Government Department.3 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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