

Impacts of Gender Within Learning Communities

Kim R. Nolt

The gender of students is one element that brings diversity into college classrooms, but how that diversity impacts teaching and learning is not always clear. This qualitative study utilizes participant observation, document analysis, and the reflexive notes of two female facilitators in order to understand how students responded to English classroom writing assignments and the gendered dynamics of interaction within small heterogeneous and homogenous group discussions in a writing workshop class linked to the English composition class. Two quarters of data were collected regarding student responses from the thirty-seven total participants. Partially transcribed notes from the sole male instructor were also gathered to help evaluate gendered responses. Conclusions revealed females prefer to relate to issues through personal relationships and emotions while males prefer to relate through social norms and logic. The results of this study suggest that teaching methods and teachers' considerations with regards to classroom gender composition and other stratifying characteristics be considered when developing courses in order to ensure a more equitable education to all students.

Author Note

This research was supported with observations from Julie Swedin, English Department, Yakima Valley Community College, Grandview Campus, and reflexive comments garnered from Brian Patterson, English Department, Yakima Valley Community College, Grandview Campus, and editorial assistance from Keith Reyes, Sociology Department, and Laura May, English Department, Yakima Valley Community College, Grandview Campus.

Impacts of Gender Within Learning Communities

The deliberate push to include a diverse perspective within classroom teaching has often deluded teachers into believing that just presenting contrasting views to students will encourage them to consider a more inclusive perspective in their thinking

Kim R. Nolt is the Lead Consultant to the Yakima Valley Community College (Grandview campus) Writing Center. Phone: 509.882.7073 Email: knolt@yvcc.edu

and writing. While this attitude of equality among all people is an ideal, the practical implementation is not as easily completed. As “US College Student Demographics in 2012” indicate, 11.6 million females and 8.6 million males were enrolled in college in 2012, showing females hold a majority in many colleges and universities, but are classroom discussions shifting to reflect that influence (MarketingCharts staff, 2013)? And on the other hand, are male student perspectives being discounted in the effort to expose students to diverse viewpoints? Does the gender of the teacher impact these discussions? Observing how males and females interact within small groups of homogeneous and heterogeneous English workshop participants prompted our writing center staff to evaluate how gender influences the teaching and learning experiences of developmental students.

The group workshop, English 085, is linked with English 095, the developmental class prior to college-level English composition. The workshop class provides extra support and feedback to students with their writing so they can successfully transition to college-level writing. The students choose which class day and time fits their schedule best, whether meeting before class or after class one day per week. While for the past ten years this has usually resulted in mixed gender groups and occasionally all-female groups, for the first time an all-male group formed. When asked to change to have a mixed gender group, they resisted and expressed the desire to remain gender exclusive. The all-female group also wished to remain homogeneous, so we proceeded, and this prompted the qualitative study, which was based on participant observation, field notes derived from that participant observation, document analysis in the form of a

review of students' final essays, and reflexive conversations between the female facilitators and with the male instructor of the course.

After the groups were selected, as female facilitators, our main research question was how does gendered identity of students, facilitators, and teacher influence participation and interaction within the small groups and would this be reflected in students' writings? In addition to these questions of gender, we noted the ethnicity of the groups to help us determine how much these were also influencing factors.

Literature Review

Gender Roles and Stereotypes

The U.S. is a patriarchal society, so much academic and journalistic literature is written by males with a male perspective (Galvan, Dolly, & Pula, 2013; Marshall & Reinhartz, 1997; Ning, Dai, Zhang 2010). However, in the 20th and 21st centuries, female writers are becoming prolific and gaining cultural respect as society moves toward equality. "Popular culture conveys an impression about the proper roles of women and men, their sexual and gender identities, and their self-concepts....Unless challenged, these experiences reproduce the social structure of gender in society" (Anderson & Witham, 2000, p. 59). The FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N.) defined gender as "the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material. Gender is not determined biologically, as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men, but is constructed socially" (1997). Tenebaum, Ford and Alkhedairy (2011) also found that context influences how a person will act (p. 707). Men, as well as women, are writing articles that raise the concern of inequality toward women in many fields. In observing the student discussions and reactions to the various

assignments, it became obvious that using gendered language played a significant role in how students communicated ideas orally and in a written format. Anderson & Witham (2000) state, “Language reflects the values of the dominant culture and therefore is one way that stereotypes are communicated and reproduced” (p. 59). While the idea of gender-specific language is not new, Motschenbacher (2007, p. 258) discovered that language is more “*performative*, not ‘as a characteristic a person *has*, but as an activity a person *does*’” (as cited in Galvin, Dolly and Pula, 2013, p. 23). In addition, Ning, Dai, & Zhang (2010) emphasized “the language women use is different from the one that men use” (p. 127).

Another factor is the impact of education on a person’s life. Anderson & Witham (2000) comment, “Education is one of the most important factors influencing people’s life chances. Without a good education, you are likely to be vulnerable to a lifetime of low-wage work” (p. 295). Typically, women are working in jobs that pay less than men in comparable positions. This “glass ceiling” is recognized as one difficulty in equality within the workplace, despite the educational similarities. “Even when men and women have the same qualifications, such as education and prior experience, they often do not receive similar promotions,” relate Anderson & Witham (2000, p. 141). In the classroom, teachers are responsible for providing a holistic and equitable teaching experience in order to provide the best learning environment possible for both males and females. This may require teachers to set aside their own views in order to suggest that students consider different perspectives. Marshall and Reinhartz (1997) indicated that the teaching strategies of educators differ by gender (p. 333). Because the trend shows more women than men enroll in college (MarketingCharts staff, 2013), women are

gradually becoming the more educated gender in American society. One might believe that educated women would bring more equality into business and academia since they have successfully negotiated past the historic deficit in leadership roles. However, stated Belinda Luscombe (2013), “For three decades, more women than men have graduated from college, but that academic dominance has not led to corresponding business or political success” (p. 34-42). Even though women have made significant gains in obtaining degrees, they still struggle in a climate of inequality in many careers which makes it difficult to affect societal attitude change regarding gender roles.

In looking at how gender influences student responses, previous studies indicated that gender does impact student reactions. In “Yakity-Yak: Who Talks Back? An Email Experiment,” Brajer and Gill (2010) explored whether the stereotype that women talk more than men was true in email communication. Their study found that women sometimes talk more than men. “Gender differences depend on the topic and to whom one is communicating” (p. 1021). This indicates that the social environment, whether in a small group or a classroom, will influence how a student may respond to a particular topic. Brajer and Gill (2010) also noted, “The available evidence indicates that males talk more in public situations, particularly when the talk is used to persuade and garner influence, much like the talk in university classrooms and business” (p. 1021). Deborah Cameron (1998) reported, “[B]ut one of the basic questions has been whether women and men use language in different ways and what this means in terms of power relationships between them” (as cited in Anderson & Witham, 2000, p. 60). Likewise, Allan and Madden (2006) indicated the presence of “gender privilege” which they stated was “often invisible or subtle ways in which differential treatment can operate to

advantage men and disadvantage women” (p. 687). In spite of much progress toward equalization within education, biases still exist, and the dominant male-centric view persists.

Wiens (2005) also addresses the issue of pedagogical swings related to gender issues. She noted, “Colleges and universities are also experiencing the underachievement of males and the gradual reduction of the number of young men enrolling and eventually graduating” (p. 14). As indicated by our group ratios in this study, women outnumbered the men in the two quarters observed. Wiens (2005) goes on to state, “Boys and girls are different; educators must acknowledge their differences so we can better serve them” (p. 15). Anderson and Witham (2000) also acknowledge there are gender differences: “Certainly gender differences do exist ...but it is important to understand that gender is a changing social construct and one that reflects complex patterns of social behavior and social change” (p. 61). Because of these differences of gender behavior and learning, teaching takes on new dimensions. Dennis Weisman (2012) shares “...being an effective teacher means being an effective listener” (p. 111-125). In order to offer an equitable educational experience, teachers need to be aware of the impact gender has on how they teach, how the message is interpreted by their students, and how they interpret what their students say.

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this study were a purposively drawn sample of students enrolled in the linked English 095-Review of English Essentials II/English 085-Writing Workshop class. They self-divided into small groups of 4-6 students. One group was

four males; one group was five females. The third group was three females and two males, and the fourth group was four females and one male. All four small groups were facilitated by females, one the faculty writing center director and the other the lead consultant (myself), and the English 095 class instructor was male. The following quarter, the same instructor and facilitators were supervising the class, and the instructor followed the same assignments, so we gathered two quarters of data. In the second quarter, we had two all-female groups, and one group with one male and three females, and one group with two males and two females. In the two quarters, total gender composition was twenty-five female and twelve male. The total ethnicity breakdown was 31 Hispanic, four white, one Native American, and two mixed race.

Research Design

The research was based on participant observation of the groups, reflexive notes, and document analysis comprised exclusively of the students' essays. We, the two female facilitators, discussed weekly any significant happenings in our respective groups which could be attributed to gender, and I took notes from these discussions and as well as field notes while in the groups where I was facilitator. Field notes from instructor conversations held privately with myself were also included in the data.

The students' first essay assignment was different for the two quarters so no data was gathered or compared. The second essay related to fears; students had to incorporate two authors from selections read in the text *America Now*, edited by Robert Atwan, and relate the reading to their own fears. Their third essay assignment gave them a choice of an immigration issue or gender issue, again including two or more

selections from readings in Atwan's text and in-class videos and personal experience. The topics chosen by each gender were recorded.

Data Results and Discussion

Our goal within the small groups was to allow the students to express their ideas without our own biases (of the female facilitators) affecting the talk, but it took conscious and deliberate thinking to use the kind of probing questions that would encourage students to look beyond their own personal biases and consider all approaches to an issue. Not that we wanted students to change their current views but we hoped they would at least consider the validity of other perspectives. As female facilitators, we realized after a few sessions that we had to re-examine our methods of promoting discussions within the groups because of our own gender and the students' differences.

Essay #1 was different for the two quarters, so we did not have significant data to compare.

Essay #2 was the same both quarters. The assignment was to respond to two different authors from class readings and discuss how the media encourages fear of specific events, such as shark attacks. Personal experience was to be included with students stating what they "fear."

The main fears listed by students were (in order of frequency) losing someone close or a family member; dealing with a disease, such as cancer or diabetes; overreacting to a media news story or scare; failure in life AND safety of children and their future (tied); darkness. Other topics mentioned were not being good enough, worldwide disaster, car accident, terrorism, snakes, spiders, bees, and success in education.

During group discussions, topics that were general in nature resulted in responses where we felt we had to ask more direct questions in order to foster comments from the males, especially as we tried to unveil their feelings; they had less impromptu interactions and remarks. The males seemed to ponder and think through their own ideas before sharing with the group; they did not react quickly. This reflects the social attitude that males are leaders and should be in complete control of their ideas and expressions. The females often shared opinions and freely discussed all possibilities before coming to a final idea about their view. Females were also more emotional and connected with more feeling to the issues rather than logic or reasons in open discussions. Cultural expectations for females are often linked to how they are expressed emotionally. However, both genders wrote with strong emotion. From the all-male group, a student wrote, "Losing someone special could be very hard for a person, but actually having fearful thoughts every day about it could be even worse" (field notes). This was one exception to the male trend of not considering how relationships connect to the topic. One female stated, "Fear can be a motivation for someone to turn that negative into a positive something" (field notes). One main conclusion discovered relating to Essay #2 (fears) was that most males focused on success or failure in life and what they accomplished in life. They were less personal and more detached in their presentation of ideas, paralleling the gender roles of American society. One participant from the all-male group wrote, "The media is a way of communication where people are able to know and be informed about the events that are happening around the world and their country. The terrorists use the media to scare people. They try to manipulate people" (field notes). The females focused on personal issues, such as relationships

with others and its impact on them. They also wanted others to understand and make connections to the issues in similar ways like they had, reflective of social expectations of females. One female student from a mixed gender group stated, “Fear is without a doubt triggered by the unknown....I encourage you to think about factors of fear, TV, media and religion and consider how you as a person can rise above the fear. People should always educate themselves on all aspects of their fears. Don’t let fear overwhelm you into a controllable state of mind” (field notes). These trends of gendered identity in relationships were expressed both in the group discussion and in the students’ writings.

Essay #3 was the most interesting to observe. The students read selections regarding gender bias in the workplace and selections about immigration experiences and crossing the southern U.S. border. Personal experience was encouraged to be included as one source, as well as the readings and class-observed videos. Overall, thirteen females and one male wrote about gender issues. Thirteen females and nine males wrote about immigration issues.

We found the males were more talkative when it came to Essay #3 and discussing the two issues they could choose to write about than previous discussions. The males were more definitive in their positions about immigration during group discussions and had already thought out supportive evidences before they were willing to talk in the groups, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous. A written comment from the all-male group was, “They [immigrants] are able to live a better life, and experience new and different things” (field notes). Another said, “People move out of their native countries for various reasons. ...My family decided to immigrate to the United States of

America for the reasons of having a better life for themselves and so my brother and I could have a better life and a better education” (field notes). The other groups also agreed with these reasons, and this evidence was present in both genders’ writing. One male in the homogeneous group said, “There are many different reasons why mostly immigrants come to the United States; it could be economic problems, personal and political problems that have convinced these people to immigrate to the United States” (field notes). Even when we asked questions about why they chose particular support, the males seemed to already have decided how to form their positions and seldom wanted to consider other views. When they did acknowledge personal experiences, they relayed those with less emotion than females, stating facts. The females within the groups, however, wanted to explore possibilities from both topics and all supportive evidence, and then write their positions in private. The females had a variety of arguments, but most essays ultimately aligned with their own family experiences related to immigration, again making connections more along relationship lines rather than objective reasoning. About immigration, one female in a mixed-gender group wrote, “If illegal immigrants want to cross over and take part in America, and our society they should participate in all of our laws. ...Being an American is a privilege. We are to get all the privileges that are entitled to us, and anyone who isn’t a citizen is not to receive the same privileges” (field notes). A different perspective came from a female in the all-female group, “Many people think that it is a beautiful dream to come to the United States, and although this is true, they do not realize how difficult it really is for immigrants like myself [who crossed illegally] to enter into the United States” (field notes). Another wrote, “...but what I know is that my family and I immigrate legally to

this country because someone one day told my dad that they had better opportunities of jobs” (field notes). Consequently, one of the larger themes in the data was these females connected to topics better when they could make a relation to the course material personally.

The males were reluctant to discuss gender issues, mainly because they expressed that they could not relate to the situations since they were male and not female. This attitude made it more difficult to encourage the males to have an open mind to consider a female perspective. The essays overall reflected the same opinions as the discussions. However, one male from the all-male group did write about gender. He expressed, “Gender has been like a dividing line between what each gender can really do with their life....If people stopped worrying about what gender is best and left both genders be or better yet be treated equally women could be able to open so many different opportunity in life for new jobs that could improve our economy and give men and women more ideas for jobs or better yet create a new job” (field notes). The variety of views regarding gender is evidenced in two females from mixed gender groups. One said, “Are we not already evolved enough to understand that gender is just a word used to limit expectations” (field notes). Another wrote, “Women and men should find a balance between each other—an attitude that allows both sexes to act similar and still receive the same respect and acceptance” (field notes). “Gender roles are cast by society. ...I believe in equality, but for women to become equal, society needs to treat men and women the same,” wrote a female from the all-female group (field notes). Equality was the desired expectation from both genders although our society has not yet reached that goal. Relating to this idea was that one group of all females was

resistant to accepting theories regarding gender roles and behavior; they viewed themselves as equal to men but their attitudes conflicted with that perspective. Personal values of subservience to males were expressed as the expectation in a relationship, and they accepted that role. The females again had more relational connection in gender-based essays than the males, but also included more objective points than in their other essays.

We observed one time that the all-male group was reluctant to share openly regarding Essay #3 and the gender issue. In the writing center, other students were utilizing the open computer lab at the same time as the group meeting. The student population was predominantly female, and the males did not want to discuss their ideas out of concern that the females would misunderstand their complete views since they might overhear only portions of the discussions. They did not want their peers to be angry with them. Everyone agreed to use quieter tones to prevent voices from carrying within the room, and they then shared quietly around the table, albeit with some restraint. They more openly discussed the immigration issue. We also observed that the mixed gender groups tended to have more variety of ideas with both topics and listened to everyone equally. In my conversations with the male instructor, he noted that the males were more open to offering their opinions regarding the gender issues in class in the second quarter of this study as compared to the first quarter. It could be that because there were fewer males in that class, they were more vocal about their opinions being heard. A younger age and personal experience may also have influenced the increase in classroom participation.

Conclusions and Implications

There are obvious differences in male and female students. Whether biology or learned behavior is the factor, they react differently when exposed to the same stimuli, as evidenced in our group experiences. But *difference* is one factor that brings diversity into our classrooms. How we as teachers manage this diversity is the challenge faced to offer all students an education that is equitable in nature while exposing them to new ways of thinking. Wiens (2005) reiterates this, stating that the whole “point is not to avoid teaching things that are difficult for boys, rather we should be conscious of the differences between boys and girls and use methods that effectively stimulate interest and catalyze rich learning experiences for both sexes” (p. 23). As we discovered with the students remaking their own learning space in our small groups, we also had to remake our approach to provide that stimulating experience for everyone. We needed to be attentive to what our students were saying as well as how they were responding to classmates. We had to consciously present multiple gendered viewpoints to stimulate critical thinking. Females were more talkative in general but were easily drawn off-topic by others’ comments as they made relational connections. The all-female groups also tended to want to discuss a wider variety of issues with each essay topic, bringing in all the authors and possible support gained from each. To accomplish our goal of keeping them on topic, we often needed to refocus the discussion by asking specific questions about the narrow topic. We asked questions such as, “What evidence did the author use to support his point? Can you use a similar idea?” With the males, we needed to include questions that were more in-depth as they desired insightful discussions, not surface or obvious thoughts. Some questions were, “What experiences or incidents might have

prompted the author to write that? How does that connect to your point?” and “That’s an interesting comment, but think again about your point on this topic. How might others respond?” These questions often explored the motivation or why of a specific statement a student made.

Teacher preparation for classes should now include reflections to consider the gendered composition of classrooms. As Weisman (2012) explains, “Being well prepared for a lecture means allowing for a certain degree of spontaneity in both the delivery of the material and in the responses to any questions that may arise” (p. 116). Teachers have adapted their methods to reach the different learning styles of students, so expanding those adaptations to include the consideration of gendered responses is also important. By implementing gendered considerations, teachers will encourage students to further develop important critical thinking skills. Teachers need to take the time to consider how to step out of their own comfort zones and perspectives and ask the probing questions that will help guide students to recognize that each person has a unique outlook about issues raised in the classroom and that each outlook is a valid response.

We as teachers and facilitators need to be aware that gender does impact reasoning and communication both in how we present instruction and how students perceive that instruction and respond to classroom assignments. As Anderson and Witham (2000) confirm, “On all matters of social behavior, language included, there is significant variation within gender and by race, class, ethnicity, as well as social context” (p. 61). Females are more likely to communicate by considering the emotional and relational aspects. Males are more likely to communicate in a logical and analytical

mode. In addition, we teachers need to be aware our own gender biases our teaching methods, classroom expectations, and student interactions, so we need to reconstruct our teaching methods to help all genders be successful in their educational pursuits. Diversity is all around us, and adapting teaching methods in consideration of that is an important part of the educational process.

References

- Allan, E.J., & Madden, M. (2006). Chilly classrooms for female undergraduate students: A question of Method? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77, 4, 684-711.
Retrieved from EBSCO host, Oct. 2013.
- Anderson, M.L. & Witham, D.H. (2000). *Thinking about women: Sociological perspectives on sex and gender* (9th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brajer, V., & Gill, A. (Dec. 1, 2010). Yakity-yak: Who talks back? An email experiment. *Social Science Quarterly*. Retrieved from EBSCO host, Aug. 2013.
- FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N.) (1997). *What is gender?*
Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5608e/y5608e01.htm>.
- Galvin, S.M., Dolly, M.R., & Pula, J.J. (2013). Genderlect and Participation in the College Classroom. *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, Winter 2013, 22-30.
Retrieved from EBSCO host, Oct. 2013.
- Luscombe, B. (2013, March 8). Confidence woman. *Time*, 181, 10, 34-42.
- MarketingCharts staff. (Sept. 12, 2013). *US College Student Demographics in 2012*.
Retrieved from <http://www.marketingcharts.com/wp/topics/demographics/us-college-student-demographics-in-2012-36555/>.

- Marshall, C.S. & Reinhartz, J. (1997). Gender issues in the classroom. *Clearing House*, 70, 6, 333-338. Retrieved from EBSCO host, Oct. 2013.
- Ning, H., Dai, X., & Zhang, F. (2010). On gender difference in English language and its causes. *Asian Social Science*, 6, 2, 126-130. Retrieved from EBSCO host, Oct. 2013.
- Tenebaum, H.R., Ford, S., & Alkhedairy, B. (2011). Telling stories: Gender differences in peers' emotion talk and communication style. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 29, 707-721. Retrieved from EBSCO host, Oct. 2013.
- Wiens, K. (Dec. 1, 2005). The new gender gap: What went wrong? *Journal of Education*, 186, 3, 11-27. Retrieved from EBSCO host, Aug. 2013.
- Wiseman, D. (2012). An essay on the art and science of teaching. *American Economist*, 57,1, 111-125. Retrieved from Proquest, Oct. 2013.