



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

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## Does Gender Make a Difference In the Classroom?

As most of us do, I walk into each new class eager to give students the most positive experience I can, regardless of their prior experiences, ethnic background, or gender. I have always attempted to be sensitive to these differences, and until recently had felt I was successful. However, last summer all that changed. After reading an article by Deborah Tannen entitled "Teachers' Classroom Strategies Should Recognize that Men and Women Use Language Differently" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 19, 1991), I began to question my approach to teaching.

Tannen, a linguist well-known for her best-selling book, *You Just Don't Understand*, focuses her linguistic research on everyday conversation. In her *Chronicle* article, she proposes that traditional male verbal behavior is a type of ritual opposition that is important in status acquisition. Females, on the other hand, use language to establish connections and build support. As a result, men are much more comfortable with public challenges than are women, and a debate-type format in the classroom may inhibit contributions from females while encouraging males to participate. This does not mean that females necessarily talk less than males, but that they are most comfortable with a different conversational style.

My first response to this article was less than positive. After all, I reasoned, in order to succeed in the "real world," whether it be in business or academia, one must learn to speak out and participate in dialogue of various kinds. On further reflection, however, I began to realize that if Tannen is correct, and I feel that she is, we are discriminating against women in the classroom in several ways. If classroom participation is a consideration in terms of a final grade, women are at a distinct disadvantage if they speak out less frequently than men. Further, if learning to use language as a means of status acquisition is a prerequisite for success in post-graduate pursuits, women need to be assisted in acquiring the appropriate skills. Otherwise, they are unlikely to be as successful as their male counterparts, even when their intellectual abilities and other skills are equivalent.

What can we do about this? Tannen makes a suggestion based on an experiment in one of her graduate classes. In this class were 20 students, 11 women and 9 men. Except for three Asian men, all of the males spoke in class at least occasionally. However, among the women, there were five who had never spoken at all, and only one of these was an Asian student. For her experiment, Tannen divided the 20 students into small groups based alternately on gender, degree program, or conversational style. Groups met six times during the semester and were placed in each type of group on two different occasions. As these were graduate students analyzing conversation, they were asked to observe various ways in which participation occurred and to complete a questionnaire concerning their experiences. Following this experiment, Tannen found that even those women who had formerly been the quietest spoke in class at least occasionally; even the women who had never spoken out in class participated actively in the small groups. This

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supported Tannen's observation that women who were intimidated by public confrontation were comfortable in small group situations and in that setting became actively involved in the learning process. Her conclusion was that "small group interaction should be part of any class that is not a small seminar."

Prompted by this article, I decided to try an experiment of my own this semester, one which would combine both group discussion and public presentation. In an upper level anthropology course, I announced that students would be asked to participate in small group presentations with four students to each group. Two students were opposed to taking part in this, so I offered them the option of a major term paper. My plan is for each group to make four presentations with a different student responsible for each. This will distribute equally the performance aspect of the group experience. Also, each student in the group will be responsible for a different portion of the topic. I feel that this will eliminate complaints of one person doing most of the work. While I know from my own frequent experience in teaching large classes that it can be extremely difficult to incorporate small group discussions into an already crowded syllabus, I am confident that it can be done. Other methods might be less elaborate than the one I am using but still be worthwhile. I am not proposing that debate and traditional types of discussion be eliminated from the classroom; doing so may place students at a disadvantage in later life. I am simply suggesting that classroom activities can be broadened to accommodate a variety of learning styles.

This essay is not intended to be another case of male-bashing that blames men for ignoring or mistreating females in the classroom. After all, I am a female and I am guilty, too. This discovery was especially disturbing to me since I have had personal experience with gender-based discrimination and have long been committed to equity in the classroom. Furthermore, I have had professional training in the observation of behavior in groups, and had completely missed something that should have been obvious to me. As indicated, I am now taking steps to correct my own deficiencies.

I believe that we all must consider more carefully the implications of different learning styles in order to provide the best possible experience for all students in our classrooms, regardless of gender. It is not impossible to set up classroom situations which include group discussion, and I challenge all who teach classes where this is appropriate to try it and to observe the result.

**Anne Rogers, Anthropology**

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If you would like to respond to Anne's opinion piece, please send your comments either to Anne at G55 Stillwell or to Terry Nienhuis at the FCTE, 161 Hunter Library. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.