

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Responses to Anne Rogers

I appreciated Anne Rogers' honest struggle with classroom gender issues, as spelled out in the February **Forum**. Strategic use of small group exercises in classes, as concluded by Deborah Tannen, Rogers, and others, clearly offers female students a language and socialization-congruent opportunity for active involvement in their own learning. Let us remember that benefits also abound for male students in these small group interactions. Men who use the typical class environment with ease to deliberate, debate, and depose are given in small groups an opportunity to learn other value skills: to work as a team, to support and encourage peers, to establish connections, to trust, and, hopefully, to respect.

Chris Gunn, Clinical Services

Amen to Anne's article and to her suggestions for small group interaction as a means of stimulating more equal participation in classroom discussion. I think this topic of gender and classroom interaction is an important issue, especially in light of the dialogues that have been taking place this year on academic standards. If students are not being challenged, are not preparing for class, and are not taking responsibility for their educations, I think we may need to take a look at the academic climate we create in the classroom. Although somewhat dated, Hall and Sandler, *The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women* (1982), has suggested six major ways in which teachers communicate sex-role expectations and affect student participation in class: (1) teachers call on male students more often than on female students; (2) teachers often coach male students more than they do female students to help them work toward a fuller answer; (3) teachers wait longer for males than for females to answer before going on to another student; (4) female students are more likely to be asked questions that require a factual answer while males are more often asked questions that require critical thinking or personal evaluation; (5) teachers respond more extensively to male students' comments than to females'; and (6) teachers tend to use sexist language. As a result of these communication behaviors, female

students are reluctant to respond in class because they feel their responses are unworthy--they become invisible. In 1992, are we still fostering these behaviors and feelings? We need to communicate the expectation that both males and females are intellectually competent. We need to encourage equal participation in our classes, whether it is in large question-answer sessions or in small groups. We need to create a climate that will stimulate all students to participate in meaningful classroom dialogue.

*Kathleen S. Wright,
Communication/Theatre Arts*

The growing body of research on gender inequity in the classroom suggests that girls are being left out and left behind in school. This research supports the thesis that both male and female teachers are gender biased toward their students and also that they are not aware of the difference in how they treat male and female students. But the circular relationship that results from this gender bias is devastating. While boys believe they fail because a subject is not important, girls believe they fail because they're not smart. As a result girls abandon their career dreams because they lose confidence in their abilities. They aim lower and achieve less than they should in society. They are tracked away from fields of the future that will allow them to provide adequately for their families. We all lose.

Certainly schools are not the only institution operating under the influence of gender bias, but schools do unintentionally play a role in dampening girls' aspirations. The bottom line is that as early as preschool girls receive less attention, less effective feedback, and less detailed instruction from teachers than do boys. Society and schools have different expectations of boys and girls: boys are expected and encouraged to be assertive, to challenge authority, to ask questions, while girls are expected to conform, to be neat, nice, and well-behaved. Girls start school with the same skills, abilities, and ambitions as boys, but they learn early on that society (and the

Responses to Anne Rogers

continued

teacher) does not want to hear their views. They silence themselves to meet the expectations. Thus, college-age women are less comfortable with public challenges and a debate-type format in the classroom in part because they have learned that it is what's expected of them. They learn that they can be more successful when they are non-disruptive and cooperative. The subtle, discouraging gender-role socialization has followed them into adulthood.

All of us have probably been guilty of perpetuating these unproductive expectations. I can think of instances when I've dealt with work-study students in a way that made unfair assumptions about their abilities as a result of gender bias. Although our students have experienced eighteen years of this by the time they reach WCU, it's not too late to begin to remedy the situation. Dr. Rogers has taken significant steps to address the problem in her classroom. And her excellent Faculty Forum piece should help raise awareness--a crucial first step toward action.

*Jeanne Lee Nienhuis,
University Services*

I received several comments concerning my opinion piece on "Does Gender Make a Difference in the Classroom." These were about equally divided between males and females, and were generally favorable. The only real question asked was whether I was suggesting that lecturing is not an appropriate teaching method. I do not think that at all. In fact, in many situations lectures are essential and certainly should not be discontinued. My main purpose in raising the issue of gender difference was to encourage the incorporation of different techniques to accommodate diverse learning styles, whether they be based on gender, cognitive differences (visual vs. verbal, for example), or even cultural background. I especially appreciated a colleague's comment that the crucial element was that we need to find ways to encourage

students to be active participants in the learning process. I am not so naive as to think that it is possible to be everything to every student, or even that every student can be cajoled, coerced, or otherwise forced to participate actively in class. However, if Tannen's observations are correct, we can provide a more comfortable learning environment for women (and possibly for Asian students, based on Tannen's comments) by giving them an opportunity to work together in small groups. In relation to Tannen's observation concerning Asian students, I was told recently by a Chinese student that they are taught never to question or challenge a professor; to do so would be disrespectful and could embarrass a professor who could not answer a student's question. I feel that increased awareness of diversity in the classroom can only serve to make us even better at a job which most of us already do well.

Anne Rogers, Anthropology