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Gender inclusive learning environments : a theoretical framework

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework based upon gender inclusiveness within classroom environments. Particular focus is given to the literature on college classrooms, student learning, and gender. Respectively, insights gained through this literature review are used to create a theoretical framework through which inclusiveness may be examined or constructed within classroom and group settings. A review of the literature is presented and informs the development of A Gender Inclusive Model for Learning Environments. Discussion of the model follows, with limitations and recommendations noted.

Gender Inclusive Learning Environments:

A Theoretical Framework

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Gender Inclusive Learning Environments:
A Theoretical Framework

Patriarchal values continue to dominate western institutions of postsecondary education through exclusive curricula and biased reward systems (Caplan, 1995; Harding, 1996; Spender, 1992; Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991). Alone, these curricula and reward systems are insufficient for today's diverse society (Altbach, 1994; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996; Wood, 1994). There is an increasing need for a curricular values shift in which affirmation of "the other" (Chavez, Guido-DiBrito & Mallory, 1996; Stanton, 1996) is manifest through inclusive classrooms, literature, and pedagogy. The construction of an inclusive educational environment is necessary if we are to service and retain diverse student populations (Caplan, 1995; Forest, 1984; Melodia & Blake, 1993)

Unfortunately, conditions of educational practice exist which allow the development of some learners but not others. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) (1992) exposed a gender imbalance and showed how male students are "favored" and female students are "shortchanged" in modern day schools. This presents a perplexing ethical challenge for educators (Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996). This challenge not only manifests itself in elementary and secondary educational systems, but becomes especially burdensome in U.S. postsecondary education where female students now outnumber male students (McKenna, 1990; Smithson, 1990).

Complicating the educational atmosphere even more, women professors are substantially outnumbered by their male counterparts (Caplan, 1995; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Roby, 1973; Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991). The percentage

of women faculty at the full professor level is estimated at 13% (Academe, 1990). As the level of education increases, the imbalance becomes all the more profound between the number of women professors and the number of women students (Spender,1992). Implications of this imbalance for women students are the lack of women role models and mentors at the advanced levels of college teaching (Caplan, 1995; Spender, 1992; Tidball, 1989).

The current educational climate coupled with exclusive curriculum and male-centered reward systems are inappropriate for the new majority of students in postsecondary education (Caplan, 1995; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Martin, 1994; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996). Thus, pragmatic implications for retention of students as well as ethical considerations of equity become increasingly necessary as female student enrollments constitute the majority at postsecondary institutions in the United States. This national trend continues throughout the realm of graduate education as women students comprise 56% of master's degree program enrollments at public universities (Syverson, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework based upon gender inclusiveness within classroom environments. Particular focus is given to the literature on college classrooms, student learning, and gender. The advantage that such a literature review offers is the compilation of multiple perspectives which have been introduced, researched, and challenged. Respectively, insights gained through this literature review are used to create a theoretical framework through which inclusiveness may be examined or constructed within classroom and group settings. A review of the literature is presented and informs the development

of A Gender Inclusive Model for Learning Environments. Discussion of the model follows with limitations and recommendations noted.

Insights from the Current Literature

The current literature presents four essential factors which influence the learning atmosphere; (a) personal histories (Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Freire, 1993; Josselson, 1996; Lewis, 1994); (b) communication (Spender, 1982; Tannen, 1991; Wood & Lenze, 1991; Wood, 1994); (c) curriculum (hooks, 1994; Lee & Groper, 1974; Noddings,1984); and (d) pedagogy (Freire, 1993; Lewis, 1994; Smithson, 1990).

Personal Histories

> Teaching and learning can have effective human outcomes only so long as we acknowledge that experience itself is not linear. Our moments of experience transform our ways of seeing not only what is to follow, but as well what has gone before. They re/form our consciousness at the moment of their generation, uncover understandings, and generate constantly new visions of past events and future possibilities.
>
> -- M. Lewis (1993)

Lewis (1994) espouses a hermeneutic perspective regarding teaching, learning, and the continual forming and reforming of the perceptions of experience. With this perspective in mind, an elaboration of the continuity between past, present, and future is manifest in ways which extend beyond a linear time continuum. The personal learning process tends to be inherently connected to complex cycles of perceptions. As the breadth and depth of knowledge increases, it is important to keep in mind that once knowledge is acquired it undergoes many changes

(Marzano,Pickering, & Brandt, 1990; Smith, 1989). Therefore, how each learner views the world at a given time becomes a factor in the current learning environment (Maher & Tetreault, 1996).

However, traditional classrooms often limit students' abilities to think for themselves or about themselves as learners (Baxter Magolda, 1994). This is especially true in traditional classrooms where objectivity is held as the highest ordered value and lecture is used as the primary teaching method. Traditional instruction makes it particularly difficult for students to connect current classroom learning with prior experience and in so doing, neglects to foster important cognitive links for learners (Noddings, 1984). According to Noddings (1984), students too often are not only detached from prior experience, they are also separated from subject matter. This division is further manifest by departmentalized climates which foster detachment and isolation of subjects. Consequently, a schism exists within the postsecondary establishment that is contrary to modern learning theory.

This schism may be linked to gender issues of faculty. Statham, Richardson, and Cook (1991) found that while men faculty tend to place the locus of learning on themselves as subject experts, women faculty tend to consider "students as the locus of learning." Likewise, when men faculty seek professional development they are predominantly geared toward increased study of subject. On the other hand, not only do women faculty tend to seek additional subject knowledge, they are more apt than men to seek effective teaching skills. As it stands now, the majority of college faculty, men, value objectivity, detachment, specialization, and autonomy (Wood, 1994). In so doing, they often dismiss issues of student learning.

Contradictions in institutional policy further exacerbate the lack of emphasis on student learning. Most institutions require faculty to be experts in their specific subject areas, but do not require faculty to be experts in teaching (Stanton, 1996). All the while, institutional mission statements typically regard student development as the "overarching purpose" for which the academy exists (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994). This contradiction between purpose and action creates an ethical dilemma for postsecondary institutions. Consequently, a transformation of policy and practice regarding student learning is imperative (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994).

Two complementing approaches for this type of transformation include the application of relational pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Noddings, 1984) and the facilitation of connected knowing (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996). Relational pedagogy which intentionally connects content to learning, persons to subjects, and past learning to current learning is a valuable approach for teaching. Graduate students particularly stand to gain from relational strategies such as introspection and reflection which help to personalize learning (Krall, 1988). Correspondingly, connected knowing is a type of procedural knowledge which transcends subjectivity through assertive questioning, careful comparison, and reasonable reconciliation of different perspectives (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996). It is a form of critical thinking which allows students to meaningfully think about their own knowing and how it connects to other ideologies (Stanton, 1996). Ultimately, by valuing students' histories, applying relational pedagogy, and facilitating connected knowing, faculty can deliberately and effectively enable the student learning process.

Communication

> Not surprisingly...findings suggest that women, like men, excel in settings that favor and affirm their ways of thinking and communicating. By implication, the ideal instructional style might blend masculine and feminine modes of communication, which would enable all students to participate comfortably some of the time and stretch all students to supplement their styles of interacting by learning additional ones.
>
> J.T. Wood (1994)

The literature discusses how basic classroom communication, at all levels of education, is generally one-sided and consistent with the masculine reward system of the academy. This reward system tends to value competition, aggression, and separateness more than collaboration, cooperation, and connectedness (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Tannen, 1991; Tarule, 1996; Wood & Lenze, 1991). The 1992 landmark study, "Sexism and the Schoolhouse," which was commissioned by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW), provides documentation of the general lack of regard which female students receive for their contributions to the classroom (i.e., knowledge expression) versus their male counterparts.

Findings from various studies conducted in the 1980s demonstrate how typical classroom communication, including both verbal and nonverbal processes, provide male students with greater amounts of instructor's attention, recognition, and encouragement than female students (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Spender, 1992). Treichler and Kramarae (1983) confirm that coed graduate classrooms are generally aligned with masculine styles and patterns of communication, which

leaves women students at a disadvantage. These masculine classroom communication processes uplift the esteem of male students by virtue of sex alone and devalue the contributions of female students, no matter how valuable their contributions. Unconsciously or otherwise, this androcentric bias is maintained in our modern institutions (Bem, 1993). Plainly, male-centeredness runs counter to the equity values which are so widely expressed in higher education.

In light of this educational climate, feminist scholars are earnestly forging through with new and inclusive ways to teach and learn (Tarule, 1996). Since women and men learners are shown to have different communication styles (Tannen, 1991), the concept of equity in the classroom suggests that feminine interaction patterns must be as accepted and valued as masculine interaction patterns, though in most college classrooms this still is not so (Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996; Treichler & Kramarae, 1983).

The Curriculum

> When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.
>
> -- Adrienne Rich (1988)

Wood (1994) states that: "A pivotal way that an arbitrary social order is represented as normal is by having institutions embody it...Thus, institutions

normalize cultural values and instill them in individuals by modeling them as standard and correct" (p. 207). Everyone who stands outside of this standard is then marginalized or made to feel invisible (Caplan, 1995; Spender, 1982). Thus, the experience for women and minorities which Adrienne Rich (1988) so succinctly describes as "a moment of psychic disequilibrium," is made manifest through a "hidden curriculum" (Lee & Groper, 1974) that is imbedded in our educational systems. According to Wood (1994) the hidden curriculum consists of three primary components. First, typical classroom communication processes are shown to predominantly nurture masculine learning styles. Second, gender stratification is prevalent in which females are characterized as subordinates while males are perceived as authorities. Third, women's contributions are marginalized and men's contributions are standardized through curricular content.

Historically, curricular content and the values reflected therein have been areas of lengthy and heated debate among scholars (Smith, 1990). Academe's value for objectivity came under close scrutiny in the 1980s. Debates emerged around the topics of the canon, the scientific method, departmentalization, and the masculine values of detachment, autonomy, and singular truth. It was through these debates that programs in minority and women's studies eventually emerged (Stanton, 1996). However, unlike mainstream academics which were traditionally favored, these new programs existed as peripheral electives. To this day, the traditional academy politically fosters mainstream curricula which quietly and disproportionately minimizes and marginalizes the contributions of minorities and women, thus reinforcing oppression and maintaining an inequitable learning environment (hooks, 1994; Lewis, 1994).

Pedagogy

> This then is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.
>
> --P. Freire (1993)

For some marginalized feminists and minority group members, retaliation is very tempting. Yet, if they seek reverse discrimination for their own liberation, then according to Freire (1993), they ultimately become part of the established ways which they fervently oppose. In order to avoid this trap, "walking the talk" of inclusiveness and setting this standard for all is imperative. It is suggested that all educators work to develop pedagogical practices which help to facilitate inclusive educational environments and which diminish the importance of exclusive systems (hooks, 1994).

Traditionally, those who hold singular views of knowledge are generally associated with conservative academics who work to discredit the concept of multiple realities and the attempts of broader-minded educators to foster new ways to teach and learn (hooks, 1994). Conversely, those educators who are acting to transform the academy recognize the value of inclusiveness and forge through with new strategies (Mahoney, 1996).

Traditionally, "pedagogy" is defined as "teaching methods for the transference of knowledge." In contrast to this traditional definition, Maher and Tetreault

(1994) define "pedagogy" as a holistic process of "creating, sharing, and redefining knowledge" through various interactions. Such a definition itself, encourages new ideas for teaching practices which may enhance the educational experience for all students.

Noddings (1984) recommends the development of an expanded pedagogy which lays out subjects in ways that embrace "the entire range of human experience," and which help learners relate content to meaning. Relational pedagogy can cross gender lines and transcend past academic experiences for both women and men learners (Baxter Magolda, 1992; hooks, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Noddings, 1984). Ultimately, pedagogy which transcends culturally prescribed barriers for learning may help to facilitate inclusiveness.

Discussion

A Framework for Examining and Developing Gender Inclusiveness

The review of the literature emphasizes the importance of four basic classroom areas which affect inclusiveness; a) personal histories; b) communication; c) curriculum; and d) pedagogy. Figure 1 combines each of these four areas as components of a model that invites attention to the dynamic processes of inclusive education. The visual image is one of motion and activity. In the center of the action, where each area converges, the development of any individual student or group may be considered in context.

As no single method of instruction is likely to create an entirely gender inclusive learning environment, neither is it expected that inclusiveness could be completely assessed with a single instrument. There are too many variables involved. However, by holistically approaching and intentionally examining the

four key areas as gleaned from the literature, a practical assessment of inclusiveness is attainable. The following section presents an outlined plan for this assessment.

Considerations for Assessing the Gender Inclusiveness of Learning Environments

Table 1 provides an organized matrix through which educational processes may be assessed. For each of the four interactive classroom areas, three levels of considerations are given. The considerations are listed and briefly discussed below.

The first level addresses the question: What exists in the learning environment? In order to fully answer this question, instructors must consider the following: Who are the learners? What are the communication patterns of the group? What is the curricular content of this course? And, which teaching methods are utilized by the instructor?

The second level addresses the question: How does what exists in the learning environment affect the learning of both women and men? Accurate answers to this question are more difficult to obtain than answers regarding what exists in the classroom. In this case, the consideration calls for grounded insight. Therefore, the answers should be grounded in current research findings as well as student accounts (i.e., student surveys, journal entries, classroom discussions, and student interviews) and performance evaluations (i.e., tests, quizzes, and papers). Thus, qualitative methods that are based on "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), along with quantitative assessment methods are used to determine the effectiveness of instruction. With that in mind, how is the learning foundation of students affected? How do patterns of communication affect student learning? How does

the curriculum affect learning for both women and men? And, how effective are the teaching methods for all learners?

The third level addresses the question: How do women and men students affect the total learning environment? Once again the answer should be grounded in current research findings and performance evaluations, as well as classroom observation and teacher reflection. This approach should provide a solid basis for seeking answers to the following questions: In what ways do learners affect the classroom milieu? How do learners affect classroom communication? How do learners affect curricular decision-making? And finally, how do learners influence pedagogical decisions?

The three levels of considerations actually walk instructors through an evaluative process. This process allows them to identify, examine, and develop effective practices within the four primary areas which the literature brings to light as essential for inclusive learning environments.

Summary

Exclusive practices which are remnants of traditional postsecondary institutions are no longer appropriate for the majority of college students. An increasing need for inclusive environments is evident. No single authority offers a simple solution to the challenge of teaching within the diverse forum that now exists in postsecondary academies. A gender imbalance adds to this challenge. A look at the current literature reveals four primary areas of classroom interaction which affect levels of inclusiveness. It was from these four areas that a theoretical framework was developed, with the intention that it would provide a tool for examining and developing inclusiveness within educational settings.

As student learning is not confined to the classroom alone, the framework need not be limited to the classroom alone. Ideally, the concepts of the framework are transferable to other campus group settings such as residence life, fraternities, sororities, and student activities. The framework presented in this paper may be used to target the four key areas of inclusiveness and to consider, in context, the interactions for any given group. By focusing on and working with the four areas, instructors and group leaders may raise the level of inclusiveness, thus providing learners with environments that are truly favorable for learning, regardless of gender.

The conceptual framework does not serve as a complete instructional manual for inclusiveness. Rather, it provides the main components. It is up to instructors and group leaders to determine what changes should be implemented within their own contexts. There may be some elements missing, such as variables in the external environment or the physical arrangement of the meeting place, yet these things are often fixed. The framework focuses on areas which can be changed or enhanced within the context of the learning environment, thus providing instructors and group leaders with an empowering tool. As with any theoretical prototype, its applicability must be tried and tested. This model is still in an incipient stage and researchers are encouraged to test the validity of the model.

Nonetheless, instructors and group leaders are encouraged to use the framework for it is well rooted in current research findings. Finally, the gender imbalance that is so profound in postsecondary education may be attenuated if theorists and practitioners work together to construct inclusive learning environments for all learners.

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Figure 1. Four interactive areas of a gender inclusive learning environment.

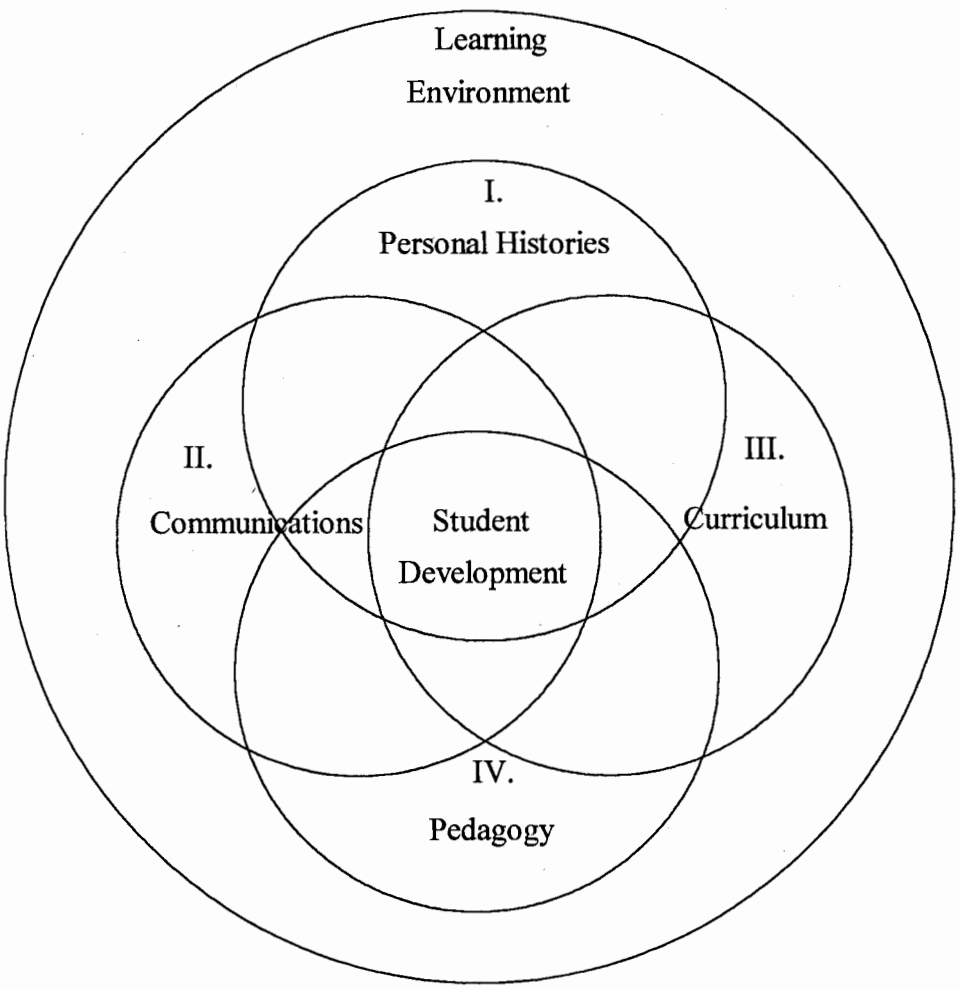

Table 1. Considerations for a gender inclusive learning environment.

Interactive Areas	Level 1 Considerations	Level 2 Considerations	Level 3 Considerations
Personal Histories (of women and men learners)	What personal and shared histories do learners bring to the learning environment?	How does the learning environment affect the personal histories and intellectual foundations of learners?	How do the personal histories of learners affect the learning environment?
Communication Patterns	What are the primary communication patterns within the learning environment?	How do the group communication patterns affect learners?	How do learners' communication patterns affect the learning environment?
Curriculum	What kinds of materials and information are presented for learning?	How does the curriculum affect learners?	How do learners influence the curriculum?
Pedagogy	What teaching methods are used in the learning environment?	How do the applied teaching methods affect learners?	How do learners influence pedagogical decisions?