

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

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# Simulating, Experiencing, and Changing Biased Teaching Behaviors

**Laura L. B. Border**, *University of Colorado at Boulder*

Research on college teaching provides startling data on the existence and effects of gender bias. Male and female professors, white and of color, inadvertently perpetuate bias toward certain students and against others. A correlative finding is even more surprising: a full 50% of professors' responses to students are bland, flat, and non-instructive (Sadker & Sadker, 1988). This essay integrates data to assist in understanding biased teaching; describes a simulation exercise created from research findings; and concludes with suggestions for enacting, monitoring, and evaluating one's own biased teaching strategies.

**Research on Bias** Myra and David Sadker (1988) documented the existence of inadvertent teacher bias based on gender and race in classrooms from kindergarten through graduate school. They demonstrated how teachers' habitual behaviors encouraged or discouraged student participation and learning, noting that only 50% of college students participate; half are silent spectators. They found that faculty give more praise, criticism, and feedback to males, who are eight times more likely to call out answers and demand attention. Students habitually self-segregate by sex upon entering the lecture hall; faculty unconsciously interact more with the male side of the room. It is encouraging to note that, upon analysis, faculty at American University succeeded in enhancing equitable interactions. The Sadkers' most striking finding is that the

instructor's interactions are not neutral. Teacher attention leads to participation; lack of it causes students to withdraw.

At Harvard, Catherine Krupnick documented differences in male and female students' participation through her analysis of ten years worth of videotaped classrooms (1985). In classes led by either male or female instructors, when males represent a majority, males speak more and for longer periods of time; use technical words, abstractions, and the discourse of the discipline in discussions; and are more likely to interrupt others. Only in classes led by a woman instructor with a majority of women students do women participate fully.

The Project on the Status and Education of Women has published nine reports since 1982 on the chilly classroom climate for non-minority and minority women. Their researchers note that faculty call on men by name, coach them toward more complex answers, wait longer for them to formulate an answer, credit their answers by name, and often address the class as though no women were present (Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1996). Faculty see women as silent and uninterested, but the authors suggest that women are silenced simply by professors' focus on men. It is important to examine both instructors' and students' interactions to have a complete picture of what is really happening in classrooms.

**Deconstructing Bias** Different researchers approach bias in the classroom from diverse points of entry. Yet their findings are complementary, and the need to address biased teaching is clear. Knowledge alone does not lead to change because gender bias is subtle, even invisible to the untrained eye. To become proficient in equitable teaching strategies we need guidance, materials, experience, and feedback. At the University of Colorado we have facilitated the process through a large group simulation that deconstructs bias experientially within a controlled environment (Border, 1990). As one participant explained, "[in the workshop] I was confronted with the very real presence of gender bias. I hadn't truly recognized it in myself and in others in the classroom -- even though I had read the statistics and reports of its existence." This simulation is followed by workshops and individual consultations to identify, modify, and monitor one's own interactions with students.

The workshop includes three simulations by volunteers who teach a lesson in their field according to different instructions. The remaining participants play the role of students, receiving individualized instructions. Professor 1 is instructed simply to teach a lesson in the field. Professor 2 is instructed to look at women, ask them questions, respond consciously to them, and encourage their participation, while only briefly acknowledging men's contributions. Professor 3 seats students alternately by gender and race, asks them to create name plates, alternates calling on them by name, and coaches all to more in-depth answers. After the simulated lessons are completed, the workshop facilitator asks participants to vote on which professor was least biased. Without exception they have chosen Professor 3.

Discussion follows through which participants begin to see Professor 1's inadvertent bias. Simulation 2 reverses and thus unveils habitual patterns of bias toward men. Simulation 3 demonstrates deliberately equitable teaching strategies. The workshop reveals the overwhelming impact of the instructors' interactional style. Participants realize that students respond favorably to equitable teaching strategies.

Reoccurring negative reactions to Professor 2 uncover a hidden aspect of bias toward men. As Professor 2 turns attention to the women, the men attempt to recapture it. Subsequent discussions reveal that men feel at least upset and at most aggressively violent when Professor 2 focuses on women. Women's reactions vary from embarrassment and uneasiness to giggles. Some appreciate the attention. Others feel put on the spot, expressing apprehension that the men might "do something." The men's aggression and the women's uneasiness may belie an unspoken dynamic. Do professors unconsciously perpetuate bias because they fear tipping a delicate balance that preserves men's good will? Is women's silence really fear? This unquestioned and unexamined avoidance of confrontation might explain what the Sadkers described as the typical professor's ho, hum classroom environment.

**Reconstructing an Equitable Classroom** Most of our thinking about teaching focuses on the abstract how of the classroom -- how to organize content, present material, and grade. This view ignores

the concrete how--how does the professor actually interact with students? Professors must begin to see themselves as the essential part of the equation and must attend to their own planning and response patterns in order to become an unbiased teacher. They can establish rules for or model equitable interactions, expand the lecture to include discussion or collaborative learning, or require non-biased seating arrangements. They can consciously turn toward and alternately question men and women. Equitable teaching requires vigilance and presence.

Most students appreciate a professor's decision to adopt an equitable approach though some may not. Women who are accustomed to invisibility may rebel. Men may act out. Consequently, faculty need to plan and build effective interactions from the first day of class. Because anonymity within a group breeds silence, professors need to reduce it. It is effective to engage pairs of students in one-minute discussions the first week, build to three minute discussions in trios, and then to four minutes in groups of four. Successful large group intellectual exchange occurs naturally when students are ready, confident, comfortable, and regularly called on by name.

Faculty can profit from training in certain counseling and mediation skills. For example, instructors can learn to paraphrase student responses, summarize the immediate discussion, and check for understanding or disagreement. Open-ended questions, such as "What seems most important to you?" or "Who would like to express a contradictory opinion?" encourage individual expression. Significant change requires attention not only to listening, questioning, and response strategies, but also to body language and voice tone. Nonverbal communication is a powerful conveyor of meaning. Faculty need to acknowledge students' non-verbal communication and encourage them to express diverse opinions. Likewise faculty need to be aware of their own non-verbals and explain incongruencies as they arise.

**Changing Ourselves** While the concept of bias is easy to understand, understanding how one's own teaching is biased is not; and the physical reality of change might seem overwhelming. To identify our own bias and observe our own transformation, we need concrete evidence. Working with a peer or teaching consultant, we

can score and analyze classroom interactions (both pre-and post-interventions) using the GESA materials (1984). Once problem areas are identified, the instructor can begin to introduce non-biased behaviors. Active listening, reframing, and mediation skills, once mastered, lead to change and eventually to proficiency. Practice can occur alone, in pairs, small groups, in workshops with a skilled facilitator, and/or with videotape analysis. Analysis of student responses is also necessary..

Professors who develop equitable strategies foster excellence and equity in college students' performance. With good will and effort we can provide all students with what should be their educational birthright: access to competent, caring, and qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

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