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ABSTRACT

Examining how students respond to gender-related issues, a study observed six classroom discussions of Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication, an introductory level college course which integrated gender issues. Four different classes, each consisting of 25-30 male and female students averaging 18-20 years of age, participated in the study. During a three month period, three of the classes were observed once, and one class was observed three times. Student responses to various gender-related topics (male inexpressiveness, non-verbal communication and power, gender differences in friendship, and language as a man-made system) were recorded and analyzed, following a phenomenological method of description, reduction, and interpretation. An observational approach was used in order to focus on the dynamics specific to the classroom setting. All student expressions were sorted into groups consisting of similar expressions, which were then organized into 13 thematic categories or clusters. Finally, these categories were ordered along a continuum ranging from complete denial to a relative understanding of women's oppression. The essence of each category is stated in a sentence from the students' perspective, and a brief summary paragraph elaborates on the category's theme. (Twenty-three references are appended.) (MM)

Resistance in the Classroom:

A Phenomenological Analysis of Student Responses to Gender-Related Issues

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to Gender-Related Issues

"They are not afraid of what we are against. They are afraid of what we are for."

Kathleen Barry (1980, p. 312)

The last two decades have seen an increasing number of textbooks adopt a gender-balanced perspective where women's experience is considered in addition to men's (Henley, 1977, Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley, 1983, Bate, 1987, Pearson, 1985, and Eakins & Eakins, 1978). These materials, when taught in the college classroom, present instructors with the problem of student resistance. As a an instructor teaching an introductory level gender-balanced course, I have encountered considerable opposition in the classroom over gender-related issues. Furthermore, I note that my experiences are shared by colleagues. In response to this shared experience, I undertook an investigation of classroom communication in order to document specific verbal expressions of resistance, particularly the language of resistance.

A general working definition of resistance is "force

exerted in oppostion." Within the classroom, resistance surfaces readily and openly in varied forms. It does have a consistent characteristic, however; it is always a rejection of the course material through explicit or implicit verbal and non-verbal expression. In this study, I examine how students respond to gender-related issues through a phenomenological investigation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Goode (1982) posits a number of reasons men may resist when faced with women's reality. He suggests that because men simply are not women they cannot see "behind the scenes" of women's lives. Furthermore, because many men share the plight of women (i.e, class, caste, ethnic origin), they have difficulty understanding oppression based on gender. Goode suggests that men, upon learning of the resentment women have harbored, feel manipulated and cheated. When they realize their "hardwork and protection" was more hurtful than helpful, they are both surprised and frustrated. Men are not comfortable with the realization that male contributions do not merit female deference and indeed, "nothing is owing" (p. 138). Goode also discusses the loss of centrality many men fear as a result of the growing women's movement. As attention shifts toward women, men feel threatened. In addition, this swing may

create a new male dependence on females.

Schaef (1981) in a chapter aptly titled, "Keeping Women in Their Place," identifies resistance strategies called "stoppers" that manipulate interaction and devalue women's reality. A stopper is any technique used to force women to "back off from their perceptions" (p. 69) . It is anything that "keeps us where the White Male System wants us to be" (p. 69.) A stopper can manifest itself in a nudge, a wink, or a pat, or in a more overt verbal form. "What do women want anyway?," "Think about all the other exploited groups...," and "Let's not work for women's rights, let's work for human's rights" are examples of the stoppers both men and women use to quell even the most sophisticated argument for women's liberation. Stoppers are a form of resistance.

Research on curriculum integration projects provides another source for descriptions of classroom resistance. Commenting on teaching practices, two instructors at the University of Maine shared their experiences with feminist pedagogy. Baker (1984) integrated a collection of women's poetry in her literature curriculum, and found the addition met with student disapproval. Baker compared her experience with gender-balanced curriculum to a storm. Upon introduction of woman-centered material, she sensed the forthcoming tempest, but found it did not "hit" until much later in the semester. The period after the storm is

described as a phase of resolution and reintegration. It is a calming time when students can reconcile their rejection of the material at a personal level with an intellectual understanding of its broader implications.

Jerome Nadelhaft did not experience the storm as his colleague Baker did. Although students did balk at his emphasis on women's exploitation in a historical context, he offers three central reasons the storm did not enter his classroom. First, the class size Nadelhaft works with is large (150+ students), and class size inhibits interaction and exchange between students. Second, the instructor's gender is important. When a woman raises the exploitation of women, she is perceived as "having something at stake, a point to prove, and her opinions about women's experiences would be therefore suspect" (p. 241). As a male, Nadelhaft's commentaries were deemed credible. Third, the discipline of history is regarded by students as a collection of facts. Therefore, the inclusion of women's history falls conveniently under that factual umbrella. The student is not as likely to challenge what s/he perceives as statements of fact.

METHOD

I observed six classrooms of Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication, involving one temporary

instructor (female), two graduate teaching assistants (both female), and one visiting faculty member (male). I observed three instructors once, and one instructor three times. Each class was composed of 25-30 male and female students averaging 18-20 years of age. This arrangement was chosen in an attempt to eliminate any results that were instructor or class-specific. In addition, I observed discussions dealing with a range of topics raised by a range of authors (e.g, male inexpressiveness, non-verbal communication and power, gender differences in friendship, and language as a man-made system) included in the class textbook entitled Contemporary Issues in Interpersonal Communication (Peterson, et al, 1986.) The variety of topics stimulated multiple comments and discussions that went beyond topic or author-specific responses. My objective was to describe student responses (not explicitly delinated by particular class membership or gender) by observing introductory level courses which integrate gender issues.

During each observation session, the instructor introduced me as "an observer," then class proceeded as usual. I observed class dynamics and took notes during the class session. I selected an observational approach in order to focus on the dynamics specific to the classroom setting.

It is possible that my presence as an observer may have

altered class dynamics. However, visitors are not uncommon to the introductory courses as they are primarily taught by graduate students "in training." The students appeared unaffected by my attendance. Classes seemed to proceed normally with the exception of three queries. Two students asked me after class why I attended and one student asked what I was writing during group discussion. Similarily, the instructors appeared unaffected by my presence. In fact, one instructor noted, "I almost forgot you were there."

ANALYSIS

Student responses were recorded and analyzed as data. Because language can provide a holograph for human experience, I chose to explore it as a primary manifestation of student resistance to gender-related issues. Certainly, resistance has many forms, such as non-verbal behaviors, but I focused specifically on language (attention was also given to paralinguistic cues, however). Because students learn to verbalize in the classroom, and discussion is encouraged in the course on Interpersonal Communication, data was abundant and rich. Naturally, my data was limited to those students who contributed to class discussion. Their comments may not reflect the entire population. However, in a course where

open and informal verbal exchange was encouraged (and rewarded for up to 10% of each student's overall grade), discussions tended to be quite inclusive and spontaneous.

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THEMATIC CLUSTERS

Following data collection, I followed a phenomenological method of description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1984). I noted each student expression on a 3x5 card and then sorted them into groups of similar expressions. In forming each group, I attended to the essential relations between each expression. I then combined similar groups creating thirteen thematic categories or clusters. At this point, I wrote a brief statement describing the student perspective, remaining true to the original language where possible. I finally organized the clusters using a "X is a stage in Y" taxonomy (Spradley, 1980) ordering the data along a continum ranging from complete denial to a relative understanding of women's oppression.

1. "I don't feel oppressed at all."

We do not live in an oppressive society. It is just not true. Oppression is a myth.

The first thematic cluster is the most extreme instance of denial or rejection of a women's reality within patriarchy. Students do not see evidence of oppression nor do they recognize it as part of their experience. The student's attitude appears to be, "if I am not oppressed, then oppression does not exist." Further, students resent being told of an alternative reality and respond angrily. That is, they resent the suggestion that their perception of the world is incomplete thus ignoring the silenced experience of women.

2. "It's garbage."

This material is absolute trash. It is worthless. It insults my intelligence, therefore I refuse to waste my time and energy on it.

The second cluster moves toward acknowledgement, but remains laden with rejection. This response evaluates the content of the course material as trashy, trivial, and silly. The student's perspective is "it is stupid, therefore I rise above it." This response demonstrates a student tendancy to organize information in a hierarchy based on worthiness. Woman-centered issues rate as clearly unimportant and useless, therefore unworthy. Interestingly, this particular response was articulated equally by women and men. For men, it is a rejection of

the "other," while for women it is a rejection of the self.

3. "Gender just isn't an issue."

Sure, there are differences between people, but we can not break everything down into a difference between men and women. These problems are not that simple. Each case is different. People are trying to lump everything into two categories: male or female.

The third cluster is similar to Schaef's (1981) description of the "humanistic leveler." When individuals speak out against women's oppression, invariably someone responds with, "Let's not talk about women's liberation, let's talk about human liberation." This response removes gender as a distinction at the very core of women's oppression. The speaker acknowledges the incongruencies among people and concurs that "something must be done," but dismisses the signficance of gender as the key factor. Once again, other issues are more significant.

4. "Because a woman wrote it, she is biased."

Feminists are out to serve their own interests. They write and speak out because they have something personal to gain, or an ax to grind. People who have a personal interest in something can not be objective and, therefore,

are not credible.

The fourth cluster represents the male as norm/female as deviant model articulated by Spender (1980). This model classifies what is associated with men as worthy, effective, and salient while what is associated with women is deficient, unsuitable, and unimportant. Students illustrate this model when they doubt authorial credibility. This response was most often voiced in reaction to articles written by a woman. Jerome Nadelhaft (1984) encounters this response in teaching gender-balanced material. Women were perceived as "having something at stake, a point to prove, and their opinions about women's experiences (are) therefore suspect" (p. 241). Russ (1983) aptly refers to this discrediting of women's writing as the "pollution of agency."

Additionally, this cluster embodies cultural assumptions about bias and objectivity. To extend Russ' metaphor, to add women to the curriculum is to "pollute" with subjectivity that which is otherwise pure. When the instructor addresses womens' experience, s/he demonstrate a bias; an articulation of a partial and certainly personal view.

5. Its not worth my time.

Attention to sexism is not worth my time because other

things are more important. It blocks my need to succeed in school and what I need to get a good job. Studying this stuff does not have long-term benefit as it will not help me get ahead.

This theme, expressed only by men, indicates the pervasive attitude of "if it will not get me ahead, it is of no use to me." Because male interests are not directly served in a non-sexist culture, erradicating sexism has little value to the responding men. This attitude informs the belief that education should directly reflect career goals, and learning about women is not relevant to these goals. "Extraneous" information has no place in the classroom.

6. Why are we learning this here?

I am confused about this course because it isn't what I expected. I never imagined we would spend all this time on feminism. What is the point?

The sixth cluster moves toward acceptance but dismisses the issues raised in the course material because they are not contextually relevant. The student, in this case, feels victimized by what I term, "curriculum manipulation." Woman-centered material may be appropriate in women's studies classes, but certainly not in

interpersonal communication (as if half of all communicators are not women). Schonberger (1987) cites this response as well. When confronted with material that challenges the conception of what is appropriate for class, the students feel baffled, or even betrayed and turn to context. "Why here?" they ponder.

The affect of confusion, however, may signal hope. Confusion, by nature, emerges from the perceived clash of realities. Students, in this case, may be thinking, "Wait! These new ideas mess up the way I see things." thereby demonstrating that they are at least processing the proposed alternative.

7. "Society has changed."

Perhaps women were oppressed years ago but things are different now. Women's liberation has changed all that and people are reacting in a new way. I acknowledge that women were not given equal opportunity before, but that just is not the case today.

In the seventh cluster, students appear to recognize women's oppression but see it as "past history." They acknowledge the influence of the women's movement's assuming that as Schmitz (1985) put it "the problem has been solved" (p. 54). Students appear to believe that our society currently provides equal opportunity for women and

men alike. Students reflect an attitude that "times have changed." They aknowledge there was a problem, but they are now simply the benefitters of its completed solution.

8. Prove it.

I dare you, instructor, to make your point. You don't have a leg to stand on, and I will prove it to you and the rest of the class. I aim to show this feminist stuff is unfounded and far-fetched.

The eighth cluster contains comments made soley by men. In general, when the instructor or student made a salient point, a male student would demand extensive proof or raise questions of doubt. These challenging responses emerged as a defensive strategy. The material is perceived as challenging the status quo of "today's world." This cluster is closely related to the previous theme. It presents itself as the active counterpart--"prove to me that society has not changed."

9. It's not my fault.

I feel like everyone is trying to fix blame on someone and that someone is men. All I hear is that men are bad and women are good and that is not right. No one is to blame! It can all be traced back to biology or society, but not men. It is not fair.

Another defensive strategy, cluster nine, emerges as a means to shift responsibility. This cluster, although not exclusively composed of statements by male speakers, is dominated by men. At this stage, students acknowledge a problem may exist, but the problem is not their responsibility. The student, particularly the male student, attempts to remove him/herself from the guilt s/he may feel upon learning of the severity of women's oppression. S/he retorts with "it is biology" that created the current situation or that "society is to blame."

10. "It's not a universal thing at all."

This information about women's oppression may be true for a few isolated cases, but you can not generalize to everyone. Feminists attempt to overstep the logical boundaries of exception and try to pretend sexism is everywhere. It is not.

Students express the attitude that, "sure it is true, but not entirely so..." Students are especially uncomfortable with any attempt to generalize as they see themselves embraced in such inclusive statements--an unsettling vision. As students discount the universality, often times stating, "it's just one person's perspective," they add validity to their claims as they cite "personal

exemption." In other words, "others may oppress, but not me."

11. Yes, but...

Feminists have a point, I guess, but I am not willing to agree with them entirely. I will concur with certain points but not the general conclusions.

Statements in the eleventh cluster accept, at least partially, the existence of some aspects of women's oppression. However, students qualify these statements with tag questions, expressions of doubt, etc. The speaker expresses only tentative or partial agreement perhaps as a strategy to counter potential peer pressure in the classroom to disagree.

12. "There is nothing I can do about it."

O.K. The problems may exist but they are bigger than me. I am just one person who can not change the world. So why try?

The twelfth cluster acknowledges the situation at hand but sees it as impossible to change. The root of women's oppression is biological or societal, therefore, beyond the realm of personal intervention. The student couples her/his lack of conviction with a lack of motivation to

effect any change whatsoever. S/he may simply feel helpless believing that the individual is powerless unaware of the empowering possibilities of a feminist vision.

This cluster can also represent refusal to take responsibility. It can function as an excuse to take action. The problem acknowledged, the speaker absolves her/hisself of responsibility masked in explanations of "I'd help if I could, but..."

13. "This is kind of a strange point, but this is the only class where there are no answers..."

I am beginning to see that things are not as simple or "black and white." My old conceptions about women and men may be wrong, and it is troubling. I have to start thinking a new way.

The final cluster ends on a hopeful note. Here, students begin to recognize the need to perceive issues beyond mutually exclusive, "black and white" catergories. Students speak in puzzled tones, appearing confused or unsettled, but transformed.

My unit of analysis, the interpersonal class, is certainly unique. It challenges the largely young group of students to reexamine their world view. It is a difficult class for most simply because it offers what most other classes do not--an alternative reality.

DISCUSSION

This study is limited in two specific ways. First, it is context bound because it examines a small population of the student body on a particular campus. However, "Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication" does draw a considerable range of students from a number of disciplines. This array of students represents a rich diversity.

Second, my study spanned a 3 month time span (February-April), relatively early in the semester. Ideally, it would be instructive to study the classrooms regularly throughout the semester to observe patterns at a deeper level, or to do a follow-up study of students at various times after the completion of the course. A number of student responses conveyed exasperation. Their powers of interpretation were taxed. A study conducted over the course of the semester may reveal changes in such responses. Perhaps a future study can determine if this is indeed the case.

Due to the descriptive nature of this study, I have chosen not to explain student responses. Such a task, however, may prove interesting. For instance, Perry's (1981) description of students' cognitive perspectives may help to clarify the range of student responses presented here. Perry finds that upon entrance to the academic

setting, most students find themselves in a dualistic mode of thinking where they tend to process information in an "either/or" fashion. That is, conceptually, they see things in categorical terms as "black or white." The majority of responses in this study comfortably fit within this cognitive mode. Perry's work, it must be noted, is severly limited as he studied only males. Belenky, et, al's (1985) work could provide the necessary balance. Their study looked exclusively at women in an effort to understand epistemological development called "ways of knowing," each describing various levels of integration and connectedness. I would encourage a new analysis of my collected data using both Perry and Belenky, et, al addressing the gender differences within student responses.

This study was conceived as a tool to better understand the experience students undergo when confronted with gender-related issues. Through understanding the student perspective and familiarizing ourselves with it, we can anticipate the barrage of complaints that few discussions of women's oppression escape. Preparation for the language of resistance may ease the mind of the instructor (particularly the rookie) who takes to task the ambitious job of incorporating gender-balanced material in the classroom. Schaef (1981) presents an interesting essay that highlights and interprets the mulitiplicity of resistant responses generally encountered, but her work is not classroom-specific.

Baker, Nadelhaft, J., and Nadelhaft, R. (1984) shared their experiences in the educational setting, but did not perform a formal study that sought to describe and interpret the emergent responses of students. It is my hope that the present study will make a significant contribution to a void in feminist communication pedagogy.

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