

## Gender Dynamics in the Classroom

The first step to creating an equitable classroom environment for all students is to be aware of existing biases.

### *Examine the classroom climate*

Take some time to examine the dynamics of your classroom. Do the students seem quiet but engaged, or do they seem hesitant to speak or detached from the class? Are some students being intimidated or interrupted by others in the class? (Derek Bok)

### *Examine your own teaching*

Be mindful of your own actions in the classroom. Have a lecture taped or record a session on your phone. Alternatively, you can keep a class roster at your podium and put a check next to the names of students you call on to answer questions.

“Analyze who talks the most, who talks the least, whom you call on to speak, who gets praise, criticism and feedback, who gets called by name, who gets coached, who gets credit for a contribution” (Sandler).

Ask yourself how you utilize the following four things:

- Praise
- Criticism, evaluation, or feedback
- Remediation, correction, suggestions, or help
- Acceptance (saying “Okay” or “Uh-huh”)

“The first three are important in student learning; the last, acceptance, merely acknowledges that a student has spoken, and passively implies that nothing very good or very bad was said” (Sandler).

### *Encouraging women to participate*

1. Create a space for all students to speak without putting them on the spot. To help students who are hesitant to speak, try the following suggestions:
  - a. Have all student take turns presenting material.
  - b. Ask students to write their responses to a question, and then ask them for their comments. Having time to organize and gather their thoughts can encourage students who wouldn't have automatically raised their hand when asked a question (Sandler)
  - c. Assign students to small groups or pairs to solve a problem or answer a question. Explain that the one purpose of the exercise is to encourage each other and respect each other's contributions. Require leadership positions to be regularly rotated (Sandler).

- d. “Refer back to the comment of a quiet student to make it a pillar of discussion” or “refer to a silent student’s written work in an affirming way” (Derek Bok Centre)
2. Avoid only calling on the most talkative students, or allowing the same students to dominate every discussion. Break up monopolies on the class discussion by soliciting responses from other students (Derek Bok Centre).
3. Don’t simply call on the first person that raises their hand – give students time to answer. Give them time to make their point as well – make it clear you are paying attention, even if they are hesitant, and quiet your own impulse to finish their thoughts or fill “every uncomfortable pause” (Derek Bok Centre).
4. Don’t allow students to interrupt one another, and intervene if students show disrespect for their classmates, either in their comments or their body language (Sandler).
5. Try to rephrase critical comments as questions, for example: “What would your answer be if you took into account the environmental impact?” rather than “Your answer is wrong because you did not mention the impact on the environment” (Sandler).
6. Pair criticism with some praise when possible, as well as specific suggestions for how to improve (Sandler).
7. Monitor your use of language and examples:
  - a. Call women by name as well as men. “Be sure to use parallel names, such as all last names or all first names.” Calling men by their last name and women by their first implies that women are seen as less serious students (Sandler).
  - b. “Avoid the gendered forms of address when discussing professions or titles of distinction” – refer to leaders and inventors with an inclusive “he or she” (Bok Center)
  - c. “Avoid stories, jokes and comments that denigrate women and girls. Most jokes about women demean females. Talking about sex or women in a humorous way makes many females uncomfortable” (Sandler).
  - d. “Consider how your choice of examples affects your students’ sense of inclusion in the discussion or engagement with the subject matter” – try to make anecdotes or even hypothetical situations more inclusive. Be conscious of making your discipline or profession appear to be an exclusive club to which certain groups of students are not invited (Derek Bok Centre).
  - e. “When offering historical examples, weigh how you express differences across time so that you are neither white-washing the past nor offending the egalitarian hopes of the present” – if women’s lives or stories have been neglected, make sure to at least note their absence and give the exclusion some context (Derek Bok Centre).
8. Actively encourage women to participate:
  - a. Many women are socialized to “doubt their own authority or frame their comments as questions... Resist the temptation to respond to inquiring tones of voice as if they were questions. Instead of answering, try to identify and credit the comment within a question” (Derek Bok Centre).
  - b. Coach women as well as men, “coaching conveys the belief that the student is bright enough to say more. Use questions such as ‘why do you think that is?’ or statements such as ‘tell me more about this’” to encourage further participation (Sandler).

- c. Ask men and women the “same kinds of questions; avoid asking men critical thinking questions and women the factual and easy questions” (Sandler).
- d. Give credit where credit is due – saying “What Mary said summarizes the issue perfectly” is a very powerful form of praise” (Sandler).
- e. When asking a question, look at all students, not just the ones you consider bright or the ones you think are most likely to respond. “Eye contact often indicates to students that you expect them to respond and often they will” (Sandler).
- f. “Listen attentively to all students when they speak, even if their answer is wrong, even if they speak slowly or hesitantly, or speak English as a second language.” Try not to nod and gesture when some students speak, or shuffle papers or look elsewhere when others are speaking” (Sandler).

For more information on creating an inclusive space for students, see the LTO Teaching Tips document on “The Multicultural Classroom”

<http://ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/MulticulturalClassroom.pdf>

## ***Creating a safe space in the classroom***

### **Dealing with disruptive behavior**

When dealing with disruptive classroom behavior such as disrespectful or aggressive comments from students, it’s important to respond immediately. Delaying action makes you appear to be an easy target or to condone the behavior. Students will often test the waters at the beginning of the semester to see what they can get away with – if they perceive weakness or tacit approval, the behavior will either recur or escalate.

When male students are disrespectful to women in the classroom, “respond swiftly and firmly.” Do not allow jokes or stories that make marginalized groups the object of laughter or ridicule. Do not wait for the students to openly complain, they may feel too uncomfortable or threatened to say anything themselves, so take action on their behalf. Most importantly, “do not call on the insulted person to tell how he or she feels about the remark unless he or she volunteers to do so” (Sandler).

For more information on classroom management and dealing with disruptive students, see the LTO Teaching Tips document “Classroom Civility: Creating a Culture of Respect”

[http://ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/Classroom\\_Civility.pdf](http://ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/Classroom_Civility.pdf)

### ***Presenting sensitive classroom content***

According to Statistics Canada, approximately half a million women report being sexually assaulted every year in Canada (Statistics Canada). However, because over 90% of sexual assaults are never reported (Brennan, 2008), the number of women who have experience unwanted sexual contact and sexual violence is astronomical. These numbers do not take into account the number of men that have also been the victims of sexual assault, and Ryerson’s

diverse population, where students may be from countries with even higher rates of sexual violence. Because of these statistics, there is a considerable likelihood that presenting material in the classroom with sexually violent content will be upsetting to many students.

This material can be considered “triggering.” When a student has had a traumatic experience in the past, triggering material can cause “physiological responses, often including flashbacks, panic attacks, nausea, severe depression, feeling numb or dissociated, and ‘reliving’ the feeling of violation” (Amherst College).

This is not to say that material featuring sexual violence or the threat of sexual violence cannot be presented in class, but that it is best to prepare students. Some steps that can be taken to prepare students for sensitive classroom content are:

- Inform students of the content in the syllabus and again during the first class meeting;
- Inform students just prior to showing or discussing the content;
- Respect students who choose to remain silent during these discussions and don’t put anyone on the spot;
- Give students the opportunity to watch the content at home, rather than in class;
- Recognize signs of distress in students – for example, becoming less engaged in their work or showing a decline in performance – and be aware of university resources that are available to help them (Amherst College).

### ***Handling Controversy in the Classroom***

Covering controversial topics and sensitive content in the classroom can be a minefield, however there are ways to prepare for the difficult discussions that may ensue.

#### **Getting Started**

- Plan from before the semester even begins – review your course material to try and spot the most likely “hot button” issues from the point of view of your students.
- Once you’ve identified the material most likely to create tension in the classroom, “reflect on how such conversations might actually contribute to—rather than detract from—your overall learning goals for the course... do not avoid difficult topics simply because you feel uncomfortable dealing with them; at the same time, do not introduce controversy into the classroom for its own sake”
- After determining ways in which these difficult conversations fit into the learning goals for your course, consider including an explanation of this in your syllabus. In this way students are both made aware of the content in advance, and connect it to their learning and growth.
- Set the tone from the beginning – build a sense of community in your classroom by helping students get to know each other, as well as agree on ground rules for discussions (Center for Teaching).

## Holding the discussion

In her article “What Instructors Can Do to Safely Facilitate Controversial Discussion?” Bettina Kipp suggests the following strategies:

- “Explain the process and define roles” – if students have agreed to a class contract or upon ground rules for discussion earlier in the semester, this would be a good time to review them.
- Be aware of students’ discomfort – check with students who appear uncomfortable after class if possible, and repeatedly remind students of your availability: “Everyone, please remember that I have office hours today and tomorrow from 9-10:30. I invite anyone who would like to talk about the topic, or the experience you had today in the classroom, to come see me to chat privately. And remember, you can also always e-mail me your thoughts and any concerns you have; my e-mail address is on the syllabus. And thanks, everyone, for your participation in discussing these difficult subjects.”
- Set an example for students – ask yourself “Do I handle conflict in a way that demonstrates the best possible response I want from my students? Do I achieve a non-defensive posture that shows appreciation of others’ ideas and efforts to communicate, even when I disagree?”
- Be proactive – stop the discussion the moment it starts becoming emotional to reestablish the rules.
- Interrupt politely when necessary – “This is a great discussion so far, and I am sorry to interrupt, but we need to switch gears slightly at this point so we can be sure that the other sides of the issue are covered.”
- Provide opportunities for all students to participate: “This has been a great debate. Now I would like to close the floor to all who have already stated positions, and open the floor to those who have not yet given their thoughts.”
- Get discussions moving in a more positive direction: “Wow, this is obviously an important topic to folks. I appreciate that we have strong convictions, and it’s OK that conversation gets energetic. Everyone is remembering our class rules, which I also appreciate! Now let’s move from the potential sources of the problem to solutions. Without debating merit, let’s just throw some ideas up on the board.”
- Debrief with your colleagues after a difficult class to gain some perspective on the class as well as potentially helpful feedback (Kipp, 2008).

## Additional techniques and strategies

The following methods, developed by the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University, can be planned in advance, or brought out when a conflict unexpectedly arises. The idea of these exercises is to get students to “develop *empathy* for other viewpoints by listening actively, paraphrasing others’ ideas, and discovering points of connection with those who think or believe differently about an important issue.”

- Have the class take a break to write out their thoughts or feelings about the conversation. “This can allow emotions to cool enough for the discussion to be respectful and constructive.”
- Require students to make an attempt to understand each other’s perspectives before reacting. “For instance, ask a student to listen carefully to another point of view, ask questions about it, and restate it before offering his or her own opinion. Or, ask students to write a paper or engage in a debate in which they argue *for* the position with which they most disagree” (Center for Teaching).

### **The Five-Minute Rule**

The five-minute rule is a way of taking an invisible or marginalized perspective and entertaining it respectfully for a short period of time.

**Rule:** Anyone who feels that a particular point of view is not being taken seriously has a right to point this out and call for this exercise to be used.

**Discussion:** The group then agrees to take five minutes to consider the merits of this perspective, refrain from criticizing it, and make every effort to believe it. Only those who can speak in support of it are allowed to speak, using the questions below as prompts. All critics must remain silent.

#### **Questions and prompts:**

- What’s interesting or helpful about this view?
- What are some intriguing features that others might not have noticed?
- What would be different if you believed this view, if you accepted it as true?
- In what sense and under what conditions might this idea be true?

Created by the Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University

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