

Some students have never considered that books were written and research conducted by men and about men for centuries before women were even admitted to universities. If two of six texts are by women, a sex bias can be attributed since students think of books by men as neutral.

Empowering Students For Leadership

Mary Woods Scherr

Believing strongly that a central goal in educational leadership courses is to empower students for leadership as well as teach theories and skills, I began four years ago to consider alternative ways of teaching—to minimize the traditional hierarchy in classrooms, to encourage more participation by students, to create a more inclusive curriculum, and to help students discover their own voice—especially women and people of color.

This essay briefly reviews the process I followed in re-examining the courses I teach, includes a section analyzing the difficulties women (and men) may experience from both students and colleagues when they initiate non-traditional ways of teaching in college classrooms, refers to recent research on university teaching, and concludes with an optimistic forecast. First, a few words on leadership.

I believe that leadership is an influence relationship that energizes, inspires, and empowers participants in a dynamic process that continually evolves to accomplish goals envisioned for a more just society. My views of leadership have been influenced most notably by colleagues who teach in the doctoral leadership program at the University of San Diego. The concepts of leadership as an "influence relationship,"¹ as an "educative function"² and as a process moving toward a more equitable society³ have become central to my philosophy of leadership. Helen Astin's work supports my goal of empowering students within a graduate classroom: She views leadership as "a process by which members of a group are empowered to work together synergistically toward a common goal or vision that will create change and transform institutions and thus improve the quality of life."⁴ Drawing on the work of Jean Baker Miller, I ask students to join me in promoting relationships that are "growth fostering," which result in personal empowerment. "Each person feels a greater sense of 'zest,'" is "more able to act and does act . . . has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s), . . . a greater sense of worth. . ." and "feels more connected to the other person(s)

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and a greater motivation for connections with other people."⁵ To practice this type of leadership in a classroom, the students need opportunities to articulate their emerging views; to share their personal experiences and observations, and to hear and understand diverse views. Only when their experiences, their understanding of theories, and their observation of their particular worlds are respected, do students acquire a stronger sense of their own unique voices and feel a greater sense of empowerment. (See Figure 1.)

But college classrooms are traditionally hierarchical and students arrive in graduate classes thoroughly experienced in the strategies of academic survival, often seeking to know what the professor wants and deferring to the professor as the source of knowledge. I think graduate students usually speak in at least two voices: the academic, formal voice that they deem appropriate and an inner, personal voice. As Beverly McElroy-Johnson explains: "There are people who have a particularly difficult time making contact with their inner voice with any confidence, and thus often take the authority of external voices as their own. Some people are so used to hearing their own voices that they hardly hear anything else, while others have been silenced or unheard for so long that they either never learned to speak or have forgotten how."⁶ My concern focuses on the inner voice of students, the voice that springs from a special sense of identity and the assurance of belonging to the academic community.

Thus, I believe a professor must consciously create an environment in which students can discover their own inner voice and safely participate as knowers as well as learners in a classroom committed to expanding the boundaries of knowledge.

Creating the Classroom Environment

To create a classroom environment that empowers students for leadership, I began to critically review the course syllabus, course content and my teaching strategies as well as the student evaluations for three different courses. I was influenced by the literature on feminist pedagogy, by the personal accounts of teachers at all educational levels who shared their action research at conferences, and by colleagues, both men and women, committed to empowering students within classrooms. Gradually I acquired the courage and commitment to review more categories for each course. These are listed below along with representative questions, far from comprehensive, that I found useful for consideration.

The Syllabus

The course syllabus offers significant opportunities in two major areas for increasing empowerment by involving students. First of all, do students have an opportunity to help plan the course to meet the needs of students in this particular class? If so, what aspects? Do they realize that meeting the needs of a particular class inevitably requires changes (unless we begin with no syllabus)? Are issues such as flexibility vs. inconsistency discussed?

Does student planning extend to evaluation? Is the grading system ever negotiated? Are there multiple forms of assessment? Do students help plan the final assessment? Can students meet in small groups to develop a stimulating essay question for a take-home final? (I have found that they develop complex, penetrating, and provocative questions.)

The Curriculum

Does the course content include works by women and people of color? Are reasons for their inclusion or omission discussed with the class? Are students encouraged to write reports or give presentations on topics or authors that may be needed for a more inclusive curriculum?

Collaboration and Team work

The academic literature,⁷ especially in relation to school reform and the improvement of administrator training programs, discusses the importance of collaborative work, yet many college classrooms are still very individualistic and competitive. Are there opportunities for group work? Perhaps more important, are group processes introduced if needed? Are difficulties openly discussed and resolved?

Communication

If speech contributes to "an emancipatory effort, a movement toward social clarity and self-comprehension,"⁸ then critiquing classroom discussions to see if they fulfill this potential will be beneficial. Are there opportunities for students to articulate their own meaning? Are other students encouraged to seek to understand before they criticize? Do discussions often become exciting academic dialogues rather than competitive confrontations? Does the class recognize the differences between discussion as a war metaphor⁹ and discussion to increase understanding?¹⁰ Are the uses of language as "power over" openly acknowledged?¹¹

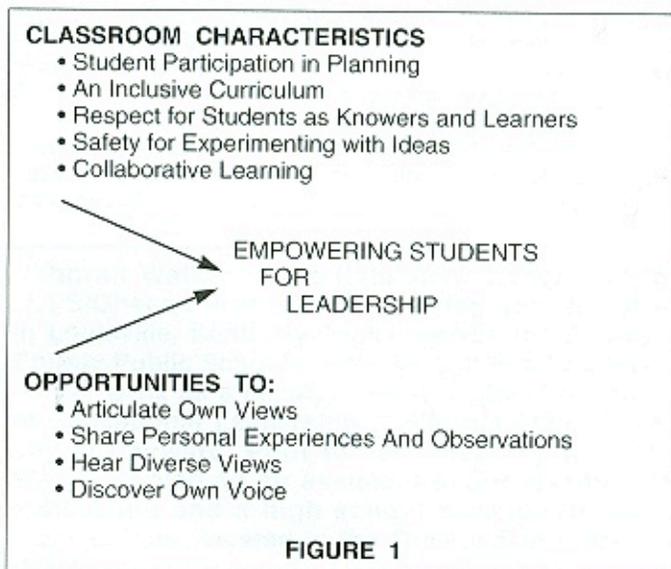
Sharing works in progress

Feminist pedagogy believes in demystifying the teaching, research, and writing processes. In *Women's Ways of Knowing*,¹² the authors reported that few professors ever shared works in progress. Students only saw the finished product and had no idea of the evolving process, the tentative analyses, or the multiple drafts that led to the product. Do I share work in progress? Do we encourage each other to try out ideas in class?

Questioning aspects of a course in the above categories can lead toward the following goals, which can be listed as classroom characteristics: 1) student participation in planning; 2) an inclusive curriculum; 3) respect for students as knowers as well as learners; 4) safety for experimenting with ideas; and 5) collaborative learning. (See Figure 1.)

With Eyes Wide Open

How we teach as much as the course content can empower students and promote leadership. If we intend to prepare students for collaborative work and if we seek to empower students, the traditional, hierarchical, teacher as expert model needs to change. Be prepared, however, for a challenge if you have created an environment in which it is safe to challenge



authority. They may well challenge you! In addition, there are two other areas of potential difficulty for professors who plan to alter their ways of teaching. One is the expectations students bring to classrooms which may be in conflict with how you hope to teach; and two, the expectations of colleagues who may have a definite view of the professor's role that may adversely affect your evaluations in the tenure and promotion process.

Students' Expectations

Students tend to hold traditional expectations of professorial roles and equally traditional views regarding knowledge. In one recent study men were judged more competent as professors than women partly because of their use of "power" language and in another study students rated men more highly than women even when the professors interrupted students and referenced themselves as an authority.¹³

The knowledge base in a course needs to be discussed and omissions acknowledged, for many students are unaware that women were excluded from theory-building research until recently. If two of the six texts for a course are by women, students may feel there's a sex bias in the material because they think of books by men as neutral.

Colleagues' Expectations

The appropriate professorial role may be largely influenced by men or by women who have followed male models. One colleague reported that she heard a department chair complain that a young professor lacked a "professorial edge." These types of evaluative comments need exploration to determine the underlying assumptions regarding professorial roles. Did the professor lack understanding of the subject, the inability to organize a course, or the mannerisms of an authority?

Arranging Support

Professors who realize they have a non-traditional teaching style, or are striving to acquire one, can collaborate with other professors for encouragement and support, and to share strategies.¹⁴ From a colleague in another graduate school I learned the advisability of carefully explaining to students reasons for syllabus changes, the reasons for various texts, and the basic tenets of knowledge production. It is also important to discuss role expectations for both students and professor.

Gender and University Teaching: Explanatory Power of Research

In a study investigating the influence of gender on university teaching, the authors used both quantitative and qualitative data to examine instructional activities, authoritative management, and students' reactions.

Although the instructional activities utilized by men and women varied little, the authors found "striking differences" in teaching emphases:

Women tended to focus more on the student as the locus of learning; men, on themselves. Although both sexes claimed to use an interactive style, women did so more extensively, taking more pains to involve students and to receive more input from students.¹⁵

In general, students gave higher evaluations to men and women who followed "gender-appropriate" models. Women, for example, were expected to interact with students, acknowledge students' contributions, and personalize. Men received higher ratings when they followed a "teacher as expert" style. Fortunately, students rated men and women as equally effective although there were differences in focus, communication style, and degree of personalization.

Conclusion

While reviewing the course syllabus for "Leadership Development for Women" during the first class meeting, I was surprised to hear myself blurt out: "I've never been taught the way I want to teach!"

Later that night while driving home I realized that that explains, at least in part, why so many teachers at all educational levels find it difficult to change the ways they teach, for we tend to teach the way we were taught.

Three forces, in particular, have the potential for promoting alternative ways of teaching that will empower students and promote their meaningful participation in leadership. One, women and people of color in university classes tend to resist hierarchical, individualistic, competitive teaching approaches. To meet their needs, changes in teaching styles will continue to be considered. Two, the schools are emphasizing collaboration in classrooms, in management, and with other service agencies. Graduate students in preparation for educational leadership need skills for, and practice in, collaboration. Three, the literature on both feminist pedagogy and collaborative learning offer insights for professors who believe in "shared power in classroom process and course design"¹⁶ Thus, in spite of the entrenched professorial roles, the general resistance to any change, the denial of gender differences in learning or role expectations, and the dismissal or trivialization of feminist pedagogy—change is in the winds. The goals of feminist pedagogy are congruent with efforts to promote educational leadership by first empowering the participants.

Endnotes

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16. *Ibid.*, p. 142.