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Gender gaps

by Susan Jhirad

RECENTLY I ATTENDED a conference of English teachers from two-year colleges. One workshop inspired a lively debate on teaching—of all things—the Declaration of Independence. The presenter, a scholarly Indian-born professor teaching at a primarily Third World college in New York, described his experience of trying to introduce the work sympathetically to his students. By the end of the course, analyzing Jefferson’s language with what he termed “their own natural deconstructionist methods,” the students had concluded that Jefferson was a racist, a sexist and a class snob, and that the work had no relevance to their own lives.

In response, a teacher with a similar student population complained that *her* students, when asked to write an essay on the topic “Explain how the Declaration of Independence is a racist, sexist and classist document,” had revolted and proceeded to defend the work. She didn’t seem to understand what anyone who has parented a teenager should easily grasp: our students do not want our ideas, even ideas they might agree with, forced down their throats. They want to discover them for themselves. The method by which we teach feminist ideas is at least as important as the content of what we teach.

I teach English at North Shore Community College, a predominantly working- and lower-middle-class college with campuses in Lynn and Beverly, Massachusetts. Our students are mainly white, but with a growing population of Hispanics, Vietnamese, Haitians and African-Americans, some of whom have come in as part of a special minority-based engineering program. They span the age spectrum from 18 to 80. Each class presents new pedagogical issues, but I have arrived at one ground rule that applies to all my classes, and that is that students must be treated equally and with respect; they must be made absolutely comfortable about expressing their views.

This may seem like a truism, but it is an important lesson of the women’s movement. When we went to college, most of us were presented with a male authority structure that sought to intimidate us and impress us with its academic credentials. Unfortunately, it is all too tempting, and easy, for feminist scholars to try to gain legitimacy by emulating that model. In my classroom, for example, it would not be difficult for me to use my age, class, Harvard Ph.D. and the power of the grade to intimidate some eighteen-year-old Italian male student with sexist views. It would not, however, do anything to make him change.

My typical classroom method in literature classes is to lecture briefly on the historical and biographical background of a work, then go around in a circle having each student express her/his feelings about the work: things they like, don’t like, things that mystify them, impress them, views of the characters. In general my students have extremely weak backgrounds in literature and general culture, yet they instinctively often hit on the

most important issues. The sexual politics emerges, sometimes more forcefully than I could ever raise it.

In a recent discussion of Act One of Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, one young woman said “I don’t know... I thought the way Helmer treated Nora was *sickening*, but he did seem to love her. I mean he was trying to be a good husband.” When I asked the class to explore the contradiction—how could he be a “good husband” and “sickening” at the same time?—another young woman offered “It’s because he patronizes her; he treats her like a child.” When his turn came, a young man, a serious student, said, “I hope nobody gets mad at me for saying this, but I think she *acts* like a child. I didn’t think Helmer was so bad.” After asking him to come back and tell us his opinion of Helmer after he’d finished Act Three, I agreed with him that Nora was also playing a role out of her weak position and fear. I asked, “Is this just the nineteenth century, or does the same thing go on today?”

It was as if a lid had been suddenly lifted off the class. Young men who had been silent during the discussion of sexism in Ibsen’s time erupted with comments like “Of course it’s still like that! You can’t trust women! You never know what they really think!” This led to a highly productive debate about how the powerlessness of women and their role-playing can harm us all. Meanwhile, one woman around 30 sighed and said, “I just thank God for the Women’s Movement, so at least we don’t have to go through what Nora went through.”

ABOUT SIX YEARS AGO I introduced a course entitled “American Women Writers” into the curriculum. Women, and particularly women with some feminist leanings, gravitate to the course. Yet we do get some men; some genuinely seeking enlightenment, some out of curiosity and some, frankly, because there was no room in any of the other “Introduction to Literature” sections. In this course I focus on gender issues from the start, by having students write a page on the topic, “How has being male/female affected your life?” Then we go around and discuss what each person has written. It breaks the ice and sets the tone for more personal reflection later on.

One year, the only male in the class was a gentleman of about 65, a former school-

teacher and widower who was very romantically attached to the memory of his dead wife. By the time we reached the poetry of the Women’s Liberation era (in the absence of the later published *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* I had culled my selections from a militant and excellent anthology of the early seventies entitled *No More Masks!*), the poor man was asking wistfully, “What’s the matter with you women? Doesn’t anyone believe in romance any more?” Being myself one of the last of the die-hard romantics, I smiled inwardly, then went on to explain how traditional romanticism has frequently oppressed women, and how poems like Anne Sexton’s “In Celebration of My Uterus” can free us. I think he heard me—a little, only a little.

Few of my students, male or female, are consciously political or call themselves “feminist,” but often my various classes break down so clearly on gender lines that I draw explicit attention to the fact. In discussing Kate Chopin’s “A Story of an Hour,” for example, the women in my class—to a woman—expressed their strong identification with the main character. She is a woman who has just learned that her husband has died in a train crash, and although she “loved him,” she is mainly overjoyed at feeling “Free—free!” for the first time in her life.

From an elderly widow to divorced women of 30 to young women of eighteen, the women understood. The men in the class, for the most part, were baffled. “I think she really *loved* her husband, don’t you?” one young man virtually pleaded. He sincerely believed that the story’s ending, when she topples down dead from a heart attack after learning that the husband is in fact alive, was not ironic, but serious. Another young man thought her a heartless bitch: “I mean, how can she be so happy, when she’s just found out her husband’s dead?”

Another piece that divided the class along gender lines was the 1916 play “Trifles,” by Susan Glaspell. I had learned that Carol Gilligan used the film “A Jury of Her Peers,” which is based on this play, in a course at the Harvard School of Education, and decided to try an experiment on my students. The play depicts an isolated farm woman who apparently has just strangled her husband. When the play opens, the sheriff, the town prosecutor and their wives have gone to the lonely farmhouse to ferret out clues. While the men are outside, the two wives look through the place and find a small dead bird lovingly nestled in a box. They comment to each other that the dead husband was a “hard man” who had refused to allow his wife children or friends. Her only company was the little bird, which he probably strangled. The men return, complain about the woman’s poor housekeeping and mutter that if they could only find some motive for the crime they could arrest her. Their wives decide to hide the bird and remain silent.

I asked my students to write about whether or not, in the same situation, they would have told the authorities about the bird. The women in the class wrote “No.” They argued that the wife had been driven to murder by her husband’s cruelty and that it wouldn’t do any good to have her put in jail. All the men argued that it was murder and she should pay for it. My suspicion that Gilligan’s view on the different moral codes of males and females would be borne out in my classroom proved correct—as I explained to the students.

PART FROM SUCH male-female schisms, it is difficult to generalize much about the opinions of my students. On the whole they are liberal on social issues and for the poor and the underdog. There is strong sympathy for feminist goals like child care and equal pay for equal work, and for women’s having careers. Most of the women at North Shore work, or have worked. A fairly high percentage are single mothers on welfare. On the other hand, many of the younger women are preoccupied with physi-

cal appearance, “moussed to the max,” victims of the blandishments of Madison Avenue and pop culture, and headed straight for anorexia nervosa. I was so troubled by this issue that I tried to address it in an “Open Letter to a Young Woman from a Middle-Aged Woman” printed last year in our school paper. There I argued that they should accept themselves and fight social objectification. Many students told me they liked it, but mainly those over thirty.

Lynn has a racially mixed population, and most of my students are strongly opposed to any form of racism. In one Women Writers class there were a number of women in mixed relationships, with half-black children. This particular class responded very strongly to a short story by Nadine Gordimer, “Town Lovers,” about a sad love affair between a black woman and a white man. In general, my students, both black and white, react more sympathetically to the writings of black authors like Gwendolyn Brooks and Maya Angelou who are working-class in origin than to the works of more privileged white women. Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*, which I consider a masterpiece, failed to impress them. On the other hand, many of them do like Chopin’s *The Awakening*, with its simple lyric style, even though it is about a wealthy woman.

On the highly charged issue of abortion there is both good news and bad news at North Shore. For several years in my “Composition I” class I organized an argument-essay about this topic. I had my students divide themselves into groups, based on whether they were for or against. Each group would develop its argument, present it to the class, and be evaluated by their fellow-students on how effectively they had presented their views. I am pleased to note that although my students are approximately 90 percent Catholic I could barely put together one anti-abortion group for every three or four pro-choice.

The bad news is that although a majority were (and are) pro-choice, many felt the need to amend their positions by adding “Of course, I wouldn’t have one myself.” My sense is that peer pressure is now running somewhat against abortion, aided by a political and cultural climate that says “Have your baby and keep it.” The issue is further complicated by the fact that many of my students have already done just that and are heroically, against all odds, building a life for themselves through education. Some of our honors students, single mothers with children, have gone on to complete degrees at local colleges—Tufts, Simmons, Smith or Wellesley. One whom I spoke to recently loves Wellesley, but because she has a child could not obtain on-campus housing; nor could she afford the rents nearby. She now commutes several hours a day to her classes.

The issue of abortion, perhaps more than any other, has tested my mettle as an impartial teacher. While it pushes all my buttons, I have had to teach students who oppose abortion how to argue their points rationally. I even had to persuade some fundamentalists that they couldn’t use the Bible as a source, because if they really believed abortion was wrong they had to convince people like me who don’t believe in the Bible. And they can’t call us “murderers” either, because name-calling alienates the opposition. A tough challenge, but some of them met it and even received A’s on their anti-abortion essays from their rabidly pro-choice teacher.

So there it is. The “bottom line” (loathsome phrase) for me as a teacher is respect for my students and their views. I have to trust that the ideas in the works will emerge from a close and honest reading of the text; I have to trust that feminist politics will ultimately emerge from a close and honest reading of their own personal experience, combined with some historical background from their teacher. And the truth is, in nine years of teaching at North Shore, I’ve rarely been disappointed. ♡

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