

February 11, 2005

Teaching Tip

*The Chilly Climate: Is there gender bias in our classrooms?*

Last Friday, CTLT hosted Dr. Bernice Sandler for a workshop called “The Chilly Climate.” Both Bernice and the workshop were wonderful. She made us laugh..she made us question ourselves. She deftly handled challenges from the audience...and challenged us back—in her affable and gracious way. In the end, she made us (both male and female) think more carefully about gender biases that creep, often inadvertently, into our classroom practices. Her message to all of us was to be aware of gender biases in the classroom and how such biases can create a chilly climate for both women and men.

I won't take up this space with a full summary of the two-hour workshop by Bernice. It was intense and she covered a complex topic far better than I can in this short note. But I do want to reflect on one of her challenges to us all. In essence, Bernice said, look to your own teaching (your own classroom) and see if you are encouraging behaviors in the classroom that limit women's involvement in critical discussions. In other words, do we treat women differently than men when covering a discussion? Her question to us was framed around and supported by research that suggests that women are not treated the same in the classroom as men. In fact, stated Bernice, women in our classes often receive less attention and are given less acknowledgement than men as critical thinkers. She demonstrated this by role-playing with a group of two female students and two male students. The men were supported and complimented on their thoughtful answers while the women were either ignored (their hands waving above their heads while the men jumped right into a conversation) or their responses were not as highly regarded as the men's responses. This is the chilly climate that Bernice says can occur in the classroom if we are unaware of the factors that can contribute to gender bias. In this case, Bernice demonstrated that the teacher was the one that limited the voices of the women. The teacher fell into the trap of giving more credibility to the men's answers than the women's. Her point was that both men and women contribute to the chilly climate. After the role playing, Bernice also told us that she decided to focus on research in gender bias after she saw all kinds of evidence that such biases were occurring frequently in college classrooms, including her own. In fact, she and her students were contributors to the chilly climate at one time in her teaching career.

Recently, I observed a group of faculty engaged in a critical discussion about a teaching issue. I noticed something curious. One of the women had her hand raised to join in the discussion while two men in the group jumped right into the fray. For 5 minutes the woman tried to get acknowledged. Her hand waved unobtrusively in the background. (I thought of Bernice's panel.) Some of the men were commenting for a second and third time before the woman's hand finally started to lower...until the conversation started to ebb. Finally, hand half raised, she was acknowledged. A chilly climate? I imagine so for this faculty person. Was it intentional on the part of the men and the facilitator not to acknowledge the woman? I don't think so. As Bernice points out, we do things inadvertently as participants and teachers/facilitators that contribute to the silencing of women in our classrooms and other forums. For example, research has shown that men

are taught to speak out and women are more apt to wait their turn in mixed gender situations. But here is the biggest point that Bernice would want us to remember. We need to understand the culture and behaviors of men and women, how people learn, etc. so that we can construct a classroom climate that is favorable to all learners. From the teacher's stand point, this might mean moving away from discussion activities that favor any one kind of learning preference, style, bias, etc. Instead, we need to create learning environments that are inviting to all students by breaking through the biases--acknowledging them and overcoming them. There is no doubt in my mind that the way we teach, the way we set up our question and answer sessions, the way we construct activities, etc. can contribute to the silencing of certain groups of students. The corollary is to teach in ways that support and celebrate the voices and critical thinking of all students in our classes.

Bernice's workshop was well worth the time spent. Stop by the Center in 201 University Hall to look over Dr. Sandler's book *The Chilly Classroom Climate: A Guide to Improve the Education of Women*. Also, with Bernice's permission, I have attached two documents that will help you analyze your own class for instances of gender bias. They are "Evaluating Your Course for Inclusion of Scholarship on Woman," and "Questions for Faculty: Examining Your Own Class for Inadvertent Bias." Enjoy.