

Using In-Class Debates to Teach Gender Issues in Psychology

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly "E-xcellence in Teaching" e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for August 2004.)

In today's society, gender roles are in a state of transition. Gone are the days when male and female "spheres" were separate and clearly defined. The current philosophy in our society encourages young males and females to set their aspirations high and to "shoot for the stars." Young people growing up in the present era have seen females in powerful social roles and positions that previous generations had not (e.g., National Security Advisor, U.S. Attorney General, Supreme Court Justice). The expression "you can have it all" describes the seemingly endless opportunities available to today's generation.

However, a closer look at modern society from the social science perspective yields a different outlook. When students enroll in a college course such as Psychology of Women or Sociology of Sex and Gender, they have an opportunity to learn how social forces act upon their lives on a daily basis. Students face challenges to their own personal beliefs and often question their socialization. They learn that achieving their highest aspirations and "having it all" may not be as easy as it sounds. Students learn that, in reality, there continue to be gender inequities and other subtle forms of discrimination in our society and in other societies around the world.

One of the challenges faced by college instructors who teach about gender is dealing with different student attitudes. Despite great social change in male and female roles, many young people cling to traditional attitudes and role expectations, whereas others have adopted a more liberal outlook. It is this diversity in perspective that sets the stage for a lively exchange of ideas in the classroom.

Instructors should approach a course on gender by acknowledging that we live in an extremely complex world and that gender roles are now defined in numerous ways. Such a course should not be used as a personal soapbox, because students may feel alienated and become less receptive to the course material if it is continuously presented only from the instructor's perspective. For this reason and others, the use of the in-class debate in courses on gender is an effective teaching tool that allows exploration of both sides of relatively controversial issues (Elliot, 1993).

This essay presents two formats for using the in-class debate as a strategy to foster critical thinking in courses on gender. Both strategies require students to research and defend a stance they may or may not support.

Debate Method #1

To initiate preparations for the debate, students are randomly assigned to 3- or 4-person debate teams. Each team member then prepares to defend either a “pro” or “con” view on a specific debate question that is chosen by the instructor. Students must develop arguments that support the view they are assigned, whether or not they actually support it. The assignment is announced at least a week in advance, so that students have ample time to research the topic and prepare notes they can use during the debate. Any reference materials used while preparing must be attached to the back of the notes, which students submit to the instructor for grading after the debate.

On the day of the debate, the two teams sit facing each other in front of the class. The debate begins with each team member making an opening statement of no longer than 2 minutes, during which initial arguments for the pro and con sides are presented.

All other students become the “audience” and can actively participate by asking questions and making comments. These students are held accountable for the material because questions about the debate topic are always included on the next test.

After opening statements, team members can ask questions of the other team and make arguments for their side. They can also use their notes to refute arguments made by the opposing side. Team members are encouraged to present information based on research rather than simply expressing personal opinions. Grades are assigned based on the quality of the prepared notes and how effectively each team member used this information. At the conclusion of the debate, team members are given an opportunity to communicate to the class which side of the debate topic they actually support and to express their real feelings. This “debriefing” is an important last step, serving a cathartic function for team members and permitting others to state their views more openly.

Choosing the debate topics is usually not a difficult task for the instructor. Newspapers and magazines are good sources, and many contemporary issues easily lend themselves to a debate format. Certain topics generate greater interest than others, and these can be tested over time. The following debate questions have been used successfully by the authors in college courses on gender:

1. Is feminism obsolete?
2. Should men still do such things as open doors for women, stand until a woman is seated, and walk on the outside of the sidewalk?
3. Should women and girls (of any age) be encouraged to participate in beauty pageants?
4. Should research on male pregnancy be encouraged and financially supported by federal funds?
5. Should American females own and use guns to protect themselves from violence?
6. Should women retain their birth names upon marriage?
7. Should use of the RU-486 abortion pill be encouraged for females in the US?
8. Are women in the US given higher status and better treatment than women in other countries around the world?

9. Does outlawing the practice of female circumcision (FGM) in our country contradict our current emphasis on multiculturalism?
10. Do increasing opportunities for women in the military weaken our armed forces?
11. Do First Amendment rights protect songs, movies, art, and literature that encourage violence against women?
12. Should society encourage acceptance of homosexuality and legalize gay marriage?
13. Can a feminist justify sending a child or adolescent to a school that is sex segregated (i.e., all male or all female)?
14. Should women's studies courses like Psychology of Women be included in the college curriculum?

Debate Method #2

Using this method, the instructor first divides the class into groups of 4 to 6 students. Each group is assigned a chapter from the textbook and must choose three possible debate topics related to the subject matter. For each topic, the group also lists three possible argument points and then states whether each point would be a pro or con of the topic of interest. The instructor uses this part of the assignment to determine the debate topics, argument points, and which groups will represent the pro and con sides.

Next, each student prepares an annotated bibliography including summaries of at least five scholarly journal articles related to the assigned debate topic. This part of the assignment holds each student accountable for doing research to prepare for the debate.

The debates are conducted in classic Lincoln-Douglas style with opening statements, argument points, rebuttals, and closing arguments. Each student is responsible for one part of the debate. After closing arguments, the floor is opened to the entire class. Up to this point, students in the audience have been taking notes that they will later turn in for course credit. Once the forum is opened for discussion, the entire class can ask questions and make observations.

The final part of the debate requires each group member to write a post-debate analysis covering the following:

1. Discussion of the topic in general and how thinking may have changed or developed during the assignment.
2. Discussion of the group process.
3. Discussion of one other debate topic (e.g., What was learned? Did anything surprise you during your research of the topic?).
4. Handwritten debate notes.

Adapting the Debate Method for Classroom Needs

The two methods described here can be modified to suit the individual needs of the specific class and instructor. For example, Richard Light (2001) of Harvard University described a simple debate format he utilizes with smaller classes, in which the entire class is divided into

two teams. He assigns a reading for the next class, and students must be prepared to defend one of two views on a “carefully defined controversy” (p. 49). This activity is then followed by a homework assignment in which students are asked to write a paper supporting the view they did not defend in class.

Course Evaluation

Instructors may wish to make use of an additional course requirement: completion of an anonymous course evaluation at the end of the semester. With an anonymous evaluation, students often feel more free to discuss their likes and dislikes about the course. In the Psychology of Women course taught by one of the authors, this evaluation assignment is required, and students receive points for completing it. On the due date, a student in the class collects typewritten evaluations from the other students. He or she then checks off the students' names on a class roster, so that points can be awarded to those who completed the evaluation.

These course evaluations are a rich source of information for instructors, and students appreciate the opportunity to express themselves in this way. The benefits to students enrolled in courses on gender become clear to the instructor through this type of evaluation. Students often say that discussing gender issues had a great impact on their lives and personal decisions. Many students mention the value of the in-class debate and how it assisted them in learning about both sides of important social issues. They comment that the course provided them with greater social awareness, and that it helped them become more assertive in their own social relationships. As Macalister (1999) pointed out, students enrolled in courses on gender often find and express their own “voices.”

In Summary

College courses on gender provide especially fertile ground for the exploration of timely and controversial topics. The use of the in-class debate provides a format in which such topics can be explored, utilizing research findings and sound intellectual arguments. Students learn the value of a global, interdisciplinary approach to gender, and they learn how information from different academic disciplines can enhance their understanding of course material. Moreover, students are truly challenged when they must develop research-based, intellectual arguments for a view they do not personally support. They are exposed to competing viewpoints on controversial issues and can then make their own decisions about which view makes the most sense to them. Regardless of the specific format, the in-class debate encourages critical thinking and intellectual development in both students and instructors.

References

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