

Gender Dynamics in the Classroom and Clinical Education Settings: Part 1

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ONE OF THE MOST important principles of teaching and learning is effective communication. Successful teachers recognize that students learn differently and vary their methods accordingly. Conversely, the inability to communicate can hinder teaching and ultimately diminish student learning. The purpose of this column is to illustrate how an understanding of gender differences can enhance the instructor–student relationship and improve effectiveness when working with individuals of the opposite gender and to offer general strategies to enhance the experiences for both teachers and students.

Acculturation

Popularized in the media by books such as *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*,¹ the differences between male and female acculturation practices, communication styles, and behavior are well documented.²⁻⁵ *Gender* refers to traits that are behavioral, cultural, or psychological associated with a particular sex. As humans develop from birth through adulthood they acquire cultural rules and societal expectations from the people with whom they live and work. This acculturation accounts for much of the variance in the way males and females communicate and behave.² In society, different cultural rules and expectations are in place for males and females. For example, males are generally taught to be independent, assertive, and unemotional, whereas females are taught to be dependent, cooperative, and nurturing. In a male's world,

there is status, competition, winners, and losers. In a female's world, there is compromise, inclusion, and dialogue.³

Bem² suggests that adult gender roles are allocated based on behavioral expectations of biological sex, and that society differentiates between males and females by socializing children into predetermined roles from birth. For example, a typical gender expectation is that all little boys like trucks and all little girls prefer dolls. In other words, children are expected to acquire sex-specific skills, self-concepts, and behaviors. As a result, males and females might process and react to identical situations differently according to their gender roles. Thus, misinterpretations and misunderstandings between genders can occur as a result of behavioral and communication differences.

When communicating, males are more task or work oriented, whereas females are more relationship oriented.^{1,5} Males generally speak to solve problems, to complete a task, to convey content, and to make a point. Each communicated point is essential with regard to leading to a logical conclusion. Females, however, generally communicate to establish closeness, to create emotional bonds, to strengthen relationships, to stimulate creativity, and to discover new ideas. This female communication style has been termed rapport talk, whereas male communication style has been termed report talk.⁵ The main point here is that differences in gender-specific communication styles can be manifested as specific expectations that can carry over into the educational setting.

Teacher Expectations

Athletic training education, especially clinical education, entails teaching one on one and in small groups. In these settings, male and female teachers might have different expectations of their students that are based on their different communication styles and acculturated gender roles. For example, consider the following hypothetical male and female responses when students are asked to perform a Lachman's test. Although both male and female instructors might demonstrate the subset skills of the task, such as tibial translation and end-feel similarly, a female instructor, given her acculturation and communication style, might be more likely to expect her students to dialogue and demonstrate a caring attitude toward patients when performing each subset skill. A male clinical instructor, given his acculturation and communication style, might be more inclined to expect students to perform the skill in a more direct or matter-of-fact way, without much dialogue. Consequently, athletic training students of the opposite gender could, perhaps, be evaluated more or less favorably than their gender counterpart because of their clinical instructor's differing expectations of students.

Effectiveness Ratings

There is conflicting research on whether students rate their teachers differently based solely on their gender. For example, Bennett⁶ found no difference in the way that students rated male and female teacher effectiveness. Other researchers, however, have concluded that gender is indeed a mediating variable that affects perceived effectiveness.⁷ Some students prefer teachers who express characteristics commonly associated with female teachers such as "caring" and "understanding,"⁸ whereas other students prefer teachers who are professional, challenging, interactive, and organized—characteristics that are less gender specific.⁷ Oftentimes, gender differences are subtle and potential biases difficult to detect and measure, and holding egalitarian beliefs does not guarantee impartial evaluations. In fact, females are as capable of gender bias as males are, and their bias, in most instances, favors males, not other females. Therefore, professionals must be cognizant of these subtle biases when administering performance evaluations, espe-

cially given differences in gender acculturation and communication styles and the misrepresentations that sometimes result. More important, evaluation bias is more likely when students or teachers do not conform to the behavioral expectations of the evaluator.⁸

General Strategies

The themes discussed in this column suggest that males and females approach the world differently, but there are few universal rules for responding to gender in the classroom or clinical setting. Successful teachers work hard to avoid gender misconceptions. They are thoughtful and sensitive to their students and use several strategies in their teaching (Table 1). Whenever possible, good teachers require their students do the same.⁹ Good teachers make it clear that they value all student comments and monitor their behavior when responding to students.^{4,10} By emphasizing the importance of considering different approaches and viewpoints, students begin to appreciate various situations and the interpretations of other individuals.

Conclusions

Athletic trainers and therapists can be challenged to rise to new levels of awareness and inclusion by understanding the ways in which acculturation, communication, and teacher expectations and ratings of effectiveness are affected by gender dynamics. Athletic trainers and therapists can assist educators in being equitable and fair in their teaching and clinical work with students and by understanding and appreciating the complexities of gender relations and the differing expectations, communication styles, and behavioral patterns among both males and females. A commitment to fair educational practice and an appreciation for differences create positive relationships and better learning outcomes.

Unfortunately, "much of the research on gender differences has tended to create an oversimplified image of women in opposition to an equally stereotypical image of men."^{11,p4} Although some readers might view this column as advancing such simplified gender stereotypes, we support the view that males and females are similar in certain basic respects and different in others and that a more complete understanding of how both genders are varied can enhance

TABLE 1. GENERAL TEACHING STRATEGIES

| Gender Behavior | Good Teacher Strategy |
|--|---|
| Using one-sided masculine pronouns such as <i>he</i> in lectures and discussions. | Use equally pronouns such as <i>he</i> and <i>she</i> during lectures and discussions. |
| Referring to male and female groups unequally by using <i>men</i> and <i>ladies</i> . | Refer to male and female groups equally using parallel language such as <i>men</i> and <i>women</i> . |
| Male students ignoring comments made by female students and monopolizing discussions. | Reintroduce the comments made by female students into the discussion by making the comment the subject of the discussion. |
| Discussions go astray or become too personal, emphasizing female tendency and desire for establishing relationships. | Transition back to primary objectives to accommodate male students' desire for linear thinking and discussion. |
| Calling on and responding to male students more often than female students. | Monitor behavior when teaching by responding to and calling on men and women equally. |

Note. Adapted from Davis,⁹ Hall and Sandler,¹⁰ and Sadker and Sadker.⁴

teaching and learning in the classroom and clinical settings. Part 2 of this column will include a discussion of gender differences related to instructional and learning styles and the various strategies athletic trainers and therapists can use to enhance teaching and learning. ■

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