



## TWENTY WAYS TO MAKE YOUR TEACHING WOMEN FRIENDLY

### 1 Labelling

There are many uses of language that put the listener in an inferior position to the speaker. For example, lecturers/trainers may refer to females as 'the girls', 'the ladies', the 'weaker sex'. When one person speaks in this way, the person on the receiving end feels inhibited and humiliated. Such language must be avoided. It may not be meant as a put-down, but it feels like it when you are on the receiving end. Monitor your own language and that of other students.

### 2 Saying and Writing 'she'

In teaching, 'he' is likely to be heard in any situation where the speaker is referring to women and men collectively. However, although the intention in using 'he' may be to refer to both female and male, the use of 'he' may be interpreted as only referring to males. It can create feelings of being excluded or ignored if you are female. This can reduce confidence and aspirations of girls and women. As a start, monitor your own spoken language for your use of the two pronouns and the order in which you use them. Try just using 'she' when referring to both women and men. Try using 'she' when your students might expect you to use 'he' e.g. in a case study or example.

In written as in spoken language it is common for people to use the pronoun 'he' when they are referring to women and men. This can be alienating for women, and can make girls and women feel the text is not relevant to them. You cannot do anything to change the use of 'he' in published text books and journal articles, but an increasing number now acknowledge this failing and have corrected it (e.g. Charles Handy). In your own writing and course material use 'he or she', 'she or he' or simply 'she' when referring to both women and men.

### 3 Acknowledging Differences and Making Assumptions

There often appears to be confusion about precisely when language discriminates. Individuals differ from one another in many ways, and acknowledging these differences, provided that they are not ascribed negative values, is often important and relevant.

- Don't make derogatory remarks about people from other groups
- Do focus on the characteristics of individuals
- Do try and address individuals by name, and persevere with names you find difficult
- Don't generalise apparent group characteristics to individual members of the group (e.g. don't ask a female student what women think about the topic under discussion).

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Students and lecturers are all too liable to make assumptions about others in the class. A frequent assumption is that they all have similar backgrounds, or that all the males like football and all the females can cook. Do not make assumptions, and give your students their individuality.

### **4 Asking Open Questions**

Research tells us that teachers in schools tend to ask boys open questions, and girls closed questions. For example an open question would be 'Why do you think bricks are the most commonly used building material?' This sort of question encourages thought about the issues involved, and the answer is not straightforward. 'What is the most commonly used building material?' encourages the student to jump straight to the answer.

Open questions encourage the development of ideas and deep learning rather than surface learning.

### **5 What's Funny – What do you mean?**

Everyone likes to hear jokes. They provide an opportunity for laughter and can break up the contents of a lecture. However, jokes that point fun at groups of the population, or even members of the student population, in a derogatory manner are not amusing. They are actively harmful. Monitor the content of the jokes you hear and make sure you challenge harmful humour. Simply asking them to explain themselves can be enough to discourage the behaviour. The kind of question could be for example, 'Can you explain that to me?' or, simply 'What do you mean?', 'Why is that funny?'.

### **6 Everyone Contributes**

Some students will talk at length in discussions in class, while others may not say anything at all. There are many reasons why some students do not speak: they may feel that they have nothing to contribute: they may feel in awe of the lecturer and other students or they may be in a minority (e.g. female) which they find intimidating. The situation can be altered by providing ground rules at the beginning, and nominating someone to ensure they are complied with.

Three possible ground rules are suggested:

- No-one is allowed to make two points in succession
- No-one is allowed to talk for more than one minute
- No-one is allowed a second chance to speak until everyone has spoken

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As an alternative, you could suggest a round. A round is where everyone in turn, including the lecturer makes an uninterrupted statement on a topic. There are specific ground rules for rounds:

- Speak in turn, not out of turn
- It's OK to pass
- It's OK to repeat what someone else has said already

### 7 Pyramid

There is clear evidence that in schools, boys occupy more of the teacher's time than girls. One reason for this is that boys make more spoken contributions than girls do, and ask more questions. It seems likely that this difference persists into further and higher education. One way to reduce this effect is to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to talk to (or work with) at least one other person in the class. This can be achieved as follows:

Individuals (5 minutes)

Students note down some questions of their own relating to the topic

Pairs (10 minutes)

Pairs of students try to answer one another's questions

Fours (20 minutes)

Pairs join together and identify general problems and areas of controversy on the topic

Plenary (3 minutes each representative)

A representative from each group reports the conclusions of her four to the group as a whole.

### 8 Alternative Assessment Procedures

The experience of education is different for everyone. One aspect of this is that individuals differ in how they can best show what they have learned. Some people find it easier to give a spoken answer to a question; others prefer to write it down. Some find unseen examinations extremely stressful. The same people may be far less stressed if they are given the questions before the examination. For some, doing course work with time to think is better than a time restricted test like an examination.

If you want to make your course as equitable as possible, then you need to think carefully about the assessment procedures you use. There are usually some rules and regulations about the form of assessment, but there are usually ways and means of being creative in setting assessment. See "53 Interesting Ways to Assess Your Students" (Gibbs, Habeshaw and Habeshaw, 1986)

For example there are many ways of setting an examination – unseen, pre-disclosed questions, open book exams, partial open book exams, multi-choice tests.

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Active learning can be assessed by problem setting, reflective log or diary, self assessment, peer assessment, case studies, interviews and orals, critical analysis, video recording, mini enterprise groups.

### **9 Giving Students support and self help**

Most students need help of some kind during their education and training. How you help these students can affect how they perceive themselves, and how other students perceive them. It is important that the help you give to them maintains equality within the group.

You could allocate specific time to help with course work, or run a surgery, or use other exercises such as Pyramid to identify where help is needed. Help can come from both lecturers and students, and this is where self-help comes in.

A pitfall in trying to help others is to fall into patronising behaviour, which is not only insulting but also disempowers the very people you wish to help. It is in fact difficult not to be patronising if you are a male trying to give females equal opportunities in the classroom.

If you want to avoid being patronising, try and encourage and support rather than organising and protecting them. For example, the best people to run an 'intro to learning in construction' session for new students are those female students who have already gone through that process. What you could provide is the resources and study skills exercises for such a session.

### **10 Peer Pairing and Mentoring**

For any student, going to a new educational establishment can be very stressful. But the changes associated with this will be greater for some students than for others. For example mature women students may not have studied for a long time and be anxious about their ability to cope; young women in a predominantly male environment will feel intimidated and alone.

A way to reduce the stress is to set up a peer pairing or mentoring scheme. Under this scheme, established students volunteer to pair up with fresh students in order to act as guides and friends to them. Its very existence however, can offend if students feel they have been singled out for special help as a needy minority. One way round this is to make it available to all new students.

The mentors will of course need training, and evaluation of the scheme will ensure it actually works.

Mentors can also be trained to offer support in particular topics which students find difficult e.g. mathematics. The mentors gain experience in training others and may even be paid a small amount for their time.

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Mentoring is multi-layered: a mentor of a new student may herself be mentored by someone already working in industry. Mentors themselves may form their own network and women lecturers in SECT areas (who may experience the same cultural and environmental barriers which students face) may also take advantage of a mentoring programme

### **11 Students' Questions**

When students lack confidence, or are reluctant to speak out, the tutor will not find out the level of knowledge in the group, or the type of difficulties that students are experiencing with the subject matter. The tutor asks the questions, and the students who do not have any difficulty, or those who are self-confident supply the answers. As women in a predominantly male environment often lack the confidence to speak, tutors need a method to include them. Two methods of involving students are included in "53 Interesting Things to do in Your Seminars and Tutorials" (Habeshaw and Gibbs, 1988, p69).

Begin with everyone in the group, including the tutor, writing down a question based on the material. Then these can be listed on the board, and a pair of students can select a question to work on and report back within a certain time to the rest of the group. Or, alternatively, students can ask their question of the rest of the group, and chair the discussion until they get a satisfactory answer.

### **12 Underlying Principles and Context**

Much of the research undertaken on female experiences in SECT education refers to the problems in relating the subjects into an understandable context or experience. When the tutor assumes the students understand the context, or does not mention the underlying principles or wider picture, the learning experience is devalued. If the tutor places the learning into a context understood by the students it makes difficult concepts easier to understand. This means recognising that students have different experience. One way of increasing students' wider awareness of topic areas is to invite them to bring in relevant material they have discovered for themselves. At least two days before, tell the students the topic to be discussed, and ask them to find something in a newspaper or journal which relates. Encourage them to be creative. Divide up the time in the session so there is time left for discussion at the end. This method not only reduces the disparity of power between tutor and students, it fosters equality between students, and enables students to place subjects into their own context and helps to empower older students.

### **13 Problem Based Learning**

"Women-Friendly Teaching" uses methods and strategies that encourage participation. Problem - based learning involves learning through tackling relevant problems. Students discover what they need to learn about by being confronted with problems, and then learn what they need to tackle the problem. Students can be given "real world" problems of the kind they would meet in employment. The problems need to be carefully designed to involve the important areas of the

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syllabus. This generates a great deal of focused motivation in students, and encourages the context setting, mentioned in 12. Problem-based learning almost always employs groups of students working co-operatively, sharing ideas, and dividing up tasks. All of these are methods of achieving an effective learning process.

### 14 Confidence Building

There is a need to be supportive to students who lack confidence in their own skills and knowledge, such as women in non-traditional areas. While it is important not to be patronising by over simplification and use of non-technical knowledge, it is also important to acknowledge success other than as a result of formal assessment. Tutors often talk about their students to other tutors, but these views are rarely expressed to the students themselves. Remember groups work better when they feel good about themselves. Find something positive to say when you finish a session, if the students have put some effort into the work. At the end of the unit, involve the students themselves in the positive thinking by listing “what we’ve achieved this term” or “what we like about being in this group”.

### 15 Collaborative Working

Research on the way females work in groups suggests a cooperative and collaborative way of working is preferred. Thus there is much to be gained in teaching using small discussion groups, or cooperative projects as assignments. If you want to organise the groups, one way is using a “line up” which also gives a bit of energy into a class. You ask the students to make a line across the classroom, with the most experienced person on the topic at one end and the least experienced at the other end. They then have to talk to each other to find out where they should be in the line. At the end you can divide them into groups of similar knowledge base, or varied knowledge base. Working in teams is one of the skills employers have identified as essential but often lacking in school and college leavers.

### 16 Ground Rules and Objectives

Ground rules in class can often be unspoken e.g. students are not allowed to challenge the tutor. These sorts of ground rules actively discourage student participation. So at the beginning of the course make a list of ground rules with the students. These can include discriminatory or abusive language and behaviour, but also things like “do not interrupt other people” or “it’s OK to opt out and in again of a discussion”. The best way of ensuring the ground rules are kept is for group members to remind people when they break them. It is important that the tutor does not see herself as above the law. Encourage students to remind you if you break a rule, and acknowledge it when you do.

Tutors often have course objectives written for course guides or college documents. These objectives can be very useful to students, to give them a clear idea of the expectations at the beginning of a course when they don’t know what to expect, and

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near the end when they are preparing for an examination. It sets the course in context and connects the course together making it whole.

### 17 Classroom arrangement

Many teaching situations consist of teacher at the front of a class, with chairs in ordered rows facing the teacher. This physical arrangement clearly divides the teacher from the students, and is based on the assumption that one person, the teacher will be in control. This is helpful if the teacher is the one giving the information, but it is undesirable if the students are to be able to discuss their ideas with the tutor, or with one another. It may also result in a situation when students in a minority (women) feel less able to contribute than the majority group (men). By changing the seating in a room it is possible to reduce the power differences, and make it safer for all to contribute.

### 18 Orientation

Tutors and students come to teaching sessions from various other activities and events from the college and outside in the world. If the tutor starts the session before students are oriented, she does not have the students' full attention and they will not have hers.

The simplest methods of orientation are based on increasing awareness of what the session is about, so writing up the programme on the board, or putting up posters, or laying out equipment as the students enter, are helpful.

Greet the students as they arrive. Have a clear policy on latecomers – do some have legitimate reasons? Can you afford to wait a few moments? Do they enter quietly, and leave questions to the end of the sessions? Do all the students know the policy? Is it in the ground rules? A time limit could be set, to minimise disruption to other students.

Relate this week's work to last week's, and to the total programme.

### 19 Feedback

All students need effective feedback from tutors in order to learn effectively. Effective feedback on a formative basis also allows students to take more control over their own learning, and move away from total reliance on the tutor. Reflection can be particularly important in practical courses involving work placement, where reflection can turn experience into learning. Methods to use can be learning diaries, portfolios of work, discussion of learning methods, reflective exercises set by tutors, use of video, audio and observers of performance or active exercises.

An activity that can be used in the return of written work is to get the students to work in pairs reading each other's work, and then feedback a positive point from the work. In this way morale is raised and students learn from each other. The tutor can then add any points not raised, to give general feedback.

### 20 Student-Centred Teaching

Not only girls and women benefit from student-centred learning methods. Student-centred teaching helps to foster a deep approach to learning, a key feature in improving the quality of learning. Many of the activities already mentioned, lead to a more student focused way of teaching. In order to keep students interested in learning a variety of activities should be used in teaching, cooperative rather than competitive methods, and encourage the responsibility of students, which helps them move on after the course is finished. Perceived good teaching motivates students, involves interaction with others, includes active learning and a well-structured knowledge base.

#### Useful references

- Coats, Maggie (1994) Women's Education  
Habeshaw, Sue and Trevor, Gibbs, Graham (1988) 53 Interesting Things to do in Your Tutorials  
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