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Pedagogy, Gender, and Communication: Learning and Unlearning Gender

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Abstract: Courses in gender communication are designed to enable students to examine the role of gender and gender identity in everyday communication. To aid them to understand gender communication, they should be exposed to at least three foundational areas and supporting content. Sex and gender differences, the social construction of gender, and theoretical gender lenses (biological, psychological, and critical/cultural) are critical foundations that students should grasp to recognize the complexity of gender and gender communication.

Though it is difficult to pinpoint specific foundations and content that cut across all gender communication courses, there are a few areas that should not be avoided. The goal of most courses in gender communication is to equip students with the information necessary to examine the role of gender and gender identity in the communication that occurs within society and the rest of the world. For students to gain an understanding of gender communication, they should be exposed to at least three foundational areas and supporting content.

Foundations

First, it is critical for students to understand the differences between sex and gender. When students first enter college, these two terms often are thought to be interchangeable. Students must be presented with the differences: *sex* refers to biological/genetic differences and *gender identity* refers to the social

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construction of masculinity and femininity. Once students recognize this difference, they are able to examine their own communication and the communication traits of others and better understand gendered-perspectives within cultural groups.

Second, gender communication instructors should strive to raise student awareness regarding the ways in which gender is created, maintained, and changed through communication. What this means is instructors must help students recognize and analyze the gender filters that they use to predict how people will behave. As a socially constructed phenomenon, gender leads individuals to assess the ways in which they behave and if they do so appropriately. Because people “perform” gender through their communicative practices, gender is constructed through communication that is cultivated by social institutions (e.g., education, family, cultural groups).

Third, students must have an opportunity to learn the theoretical lenses (i.e., biological, psychological, and critical/cultural) through which gender is observed and examined. By analyzing gender via these lenses, they “can learn to move away from secondhand knowledge about men and women and analyze gender-related communication for [them]selves” (Bate & Bowker, 1997, p. 35). Essential theories that are reflective of these lenses include biological theories of chromosomal development and theories of brain development; psychological theories such as the psychoanalytic perspectives of Freud and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 2002; Mischel, 1966); and critical/cultural theories that create an understanding of the cultural and social construction of gender via communication.

Content Areas

Based on these foundations, three general content areas should be covered in gender communication courses. These areas are intersectionality, gender diversity and sex differences, and emancipation. Sex and gender are not fixed; they are more complicated than binary. People are not just either female or male or feminine or masculine. Gender and intersectionality consider gender at interplay with other overlapping and interdependent systems of social categorizations and power differentials such as ethnicity, class, kinship ties, sexuality, age, marital status, and abilities. To gain an in-depth understanding of gender, gendered lives must be more accurately studied across axes of other social identities, although it should be noted that other social identities can further complicate sex and gender identity.

Gender diversity is not the same thing as sex differences. A singular focus on gender and communication merely as sex difference does not explain the complexity of gender in communication. For example, queer theory critiques the binary categorization of gender and sexuality. Queer theory supports a nonnormative approach to gender studies and explores the notion that identities are not fixed (Elia, 2003). Individuals cannot be easily labeled as masculine (male) or feminine (female) because identities consist of many varied components. Understanding the complexity of gender allows students to examine gender in communication more than merely a way to track differences between men and women.

Emancipation from either the interrogation of normative gendered practices or binary gender practices allows students to embrace gender diversity. Gender identity need not be oppressive or limiting. It should extend a more fundamental understanding of difference and how individual identities and social perceptions shape attitudes and behavior toward others. For example, social construction of inequality considers how and why categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality are multilayered and deeply embedded ideologies. Knowing how each category is constructed, marketed, maintained,

and experienced allows for possible transformation. Breaking with socially-constructed, normative, gendered practices offers an opportunity for students to identify the ways that their own gendered practices provide potential for personal and social transformation.

Applied Assignments

Two applied assignments teach the aforementioned foundations and content areas. The first assignment, *Gender Communication in My World*, is intended to help students examine and apply aspects of gender communication to a specific “real life” context. Students select a specific context (e.g., classroom, media, music, film, video, organizations, friendship, family) to observe, analyze, and present in 10 minutes to the class. There are four parts to this assignment:

- ▶ Students first initially discuss what they know about gendered communication in this context based on text material, class articles, videos, and additional research. They should be prepared to discuss any theoretical perspectives and authors who have studied this context or area of gender communication.
- ▶ Students then present the “real life,” physical example of gendered communication (e.g., video clip, song lyrics, magazine advertisement, classroom observation, news story, Internet article, research article, family experiences, photographs).
- ▶ Students present their conclusions as they relate their selected example back to what they have learned in class. In other words, they address whether their experience validates or refutes what was discussed in class.
- ▶ Students prepare a bulleted handout of their presentation for the class. The handout is graded in terms of information and appearance.

The second assignment, *Advice Blog and Presentation*, requires students to select a topic from their course readings and conduct additional research that not only interests them, but also could help others. They write a 1,000- to 1,250-word blog post that summarizes the research area and offers theoretical and evidence-based advice for gender communication. Students are instructed to synthesize the scholarly research articles for an identified audience, paying attention to the opening paragraph, where word choice and sentence progression are important devices to attract and retain readership. For the body of the blog, students should choose words carefully and expand text to provide parenthetical or sentence-length definitions of key concepts, but avoid jargon. They should consider using similes, metaphors, or other words that convey a strong visual connection to things that readers are likely familiar. The “advice” should be specific. They then upload their blog post to *WordPress* and the instructor will critique the post. For this online assignment, students need to include images appropriate to the topic, voice, or advice in the blog.

Issues to Consider

To equip students with the information necessary to examine the role of gender and gender identity within communication, several topics must be taken into consideration. First, students often struggle with terminology and conceptual definitions that surround gender. It is important for both instructors and students to understand the difference among biological sex, sexual orientation, sexual identity, gender, gender identity, and gender roles (Manning, Stern, & Johnson, 2017). Second, instructors must prepare students for difficult gender-related dialogue. Third, it is helpful for students and instructors to

be hyper-aware when critically consuming gender-related content during the course of the semester in a variety of spaces (e.g., social media, news, documentaries) and in ways that may not be as central to daily life in other semesters. In these ways, the importance of covering potentially sensitive or controversial topics such as queer theory/quare theory, LGBTQ rights, and transgender identity become vitally important. Similarly, students who identify with traditional cisgender roles and values also must feel valued and free to share their ideas in class. Fourth, instructors must balance topic coverage in the course so one gender identity is not privileged over another; this may be especially necessary if the course fulfills requirements for university minors or certificates.

Conclusion

When teaching the gender communication course, there are any number of issues to consider from both the student and instructor perspective. In this article, foundations and content areas have been considered as related to terminology, difficult dialogues, contemporary conversations of gender, and balanced topic coverage. Above all, the gender communication course must raise student awareness for ways in which gender is created, maintained, and changed through communication.

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