



The Learning Style of Males and How to Involve College Men in the Curriculum

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Now the minority (35%) of those attending college and university, young often arrive on campuses that are unwelcoming. Until fairly recently an atmosphere unlike that at the elementary level, where for many decades boys have been treated as defective girls, the undergraduate classroom today is typically a place where young men sit quietly. Male-positive pedagogic approaches to engaging college-age men are identified that depend not on the sex of the instructors but on their attitudes toward males. The undercurrent of misandry in academe is addressed.

Key Words: misandry, tertiary education, college classroom, males, young males, male-positive ped-

agogy

Introductory Note: Affiliated with the Modern Language Association of America, the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) hosts an annual conference primarily for scholars working in the northeastern United States and Canada. Papers are presented on topics concerning various languages, their literatures, and their pedagogies. In addition, NeMLA supports special-interest caucuses that both investigate certain challenges faced by those working in academe and organize conference panels that address these challenges. Among these groups is the Women's and Gender Studies Caucus that, according to its web page, "welcomes members interested in feminist scholarship, women's and gender studies, and the status of women in the profession at all stages of their careers." NeMLA does not currently maintain a men's caucus.

Following is one of three papers presented by members of the staff of New Male Studies at the 44th annual NeMLA convention held in Boston, Massachusetts, on March 22, 2013, hosted by Tufts University. The other two papers are included in this issue. Each paper offers practical examples of male-friendly strategies that enhance critical inquiry and teaching methods. They comprised a panel, "The New Male Studies in Praxis: Male-Positive Criticism and Classroom Practice," that was initially proposed by one of the presenters (Dennis Gouws) as either a pedagogy or a women's and gender-studies panel and was accepted as one among nineteen pedagogy panels. Twenty-eight women's and gender studies panels were accepted.

During the last two decades the experience of most males in the college classroom has changed remarkably. The number of males attending college has declined to a nationwide 37% of the total college population. Recently, relevant evidence has been accumulating that suggests the college classroom setting and even campus life in general are no longer welcoming to young males. As a result, many of those males who do attend college have fallen silent in the classroom and have disengaged from campus life with the exception of participation in athletics. While it is not yet clear why this has occurred, the need for immediate concern and concerted efforts to make tertiary level education male-affirmative and male-positive once again especially in the humanities is inarguable. Just as at the primary and secondary levels, the learning style of boys (much like their styles of play and social interaction) varies in identifiable and important ways from that of girls, and the ways young males interact with their teachers, each other, and female students at the college level are also distinctive.

Drawing on forty years' experience teaching undergraduates, I will describe their learning style and propose ways to facilitate involving college males in the curriculum, including especially taking part in classroom discussions. I will recount ways of interacting with young males that draw them into the life of the mind as it plays out in the undergraduate classroom. I will suggest that it is not so much a matter of the gender of the teacher but rather his or her assumptions about male experience and the teacher's understanding of male behavior that determine whether the instructional ethos is male-positive.

To provide some context for my comments and suggestions, let me begin by revealing a few

facts of my personal life as a student that are germane to this discussion. In the postwar years from 1951 to 1957, I was a primary school student in an eight-room brick schoolhouse in a semirural county seat city in western Pennsylvania. I had only women as teachers from kindergarten through the sixth grade. Ann Rummell (I still remember her name quite clearly), the principal of my district ward school, was an imposing, serious woman whose presence was felt from the moment I arrived for my first half-day of kindergarten until the final days of my sixth-grade year during which she had been my teacher. Every day, she greeted every student who arrived at the schoolhouse door. During that same period, the most important early influence in my life was Mildred Gardner, a woman who taught me piano and composition privately in her father's studio in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, and later at Carlow University in Pittsburgh. Even though she was 46 years older than I was when I became her student while in third grade, after ten years of instruction and my sojourn away from home at college we became close friends. Our endless discussions over tea in her dining room were formative for me through my early 30s.

It was not until I moved on to junior high school that I encountered my first male teachers, who were in short supply as you may know following the Second World War. My Latin teacher in junior high school was a woman. Our senior high principal was a woman, Helen Barron, another powerful, commanding figure who presided over the group of several hundred girls and boys from our predominantly middle- and lower-class town and the surrounding dairy-farming countryside. These were all women who understood the differences between boys and girls and demanded respect on the authority of their interest in us, their personalities, and their unspoken but unambiguous message that they valued us as children—some male, some female—and in the first place as individual boys and girls. We were not gendered beings but essentially different groups of a common youthful humanity. Yet while clearly recognizing that boys and girls are essentially different in important respects, they never said “boys will be boys” or “girls are that way.”

When I entered my last year of senior high school in 1963 the word ‘gender’ was introduced into the language in its current usage in a little-known book by the British sociologist Alec Comfort, *Sex in Society* (second edition), first published in 1950 but without the word ‘gender’ appearing anywhere in that text. Sometime between 1950 and 1963, however, the modern notion of gender—a euphemism for ‘sex’—was given its name. The concept has since created no little excitement among those interested in understanding men and women, boys and girls. Up to that time, only my Latin teacher used the word ‘gender’, which applied to nouns, not people.

On my parents’ authority (they were paying the bills), the following year I went off to Franklin and Marshall College which was then all male, as it had been for 177 years and remained until 1969, the year after I graduated, when it admitted the first woman. In only eleven years (by 1980), parity in male and female university enrollments had been reached nationally. Now, in 2013 at my alma mater and elsewhere, for every male attending there are on average two young females.

At college, I attended classes, plied my skills as a pianist accompanying the glee club, wrote music reviews for the school newspaper, performed three leading roles in the Green Room Theatre, and took part in the ‘60s counter culture, which we were sure would change the world. Sorry...

Today, at Wagner College in New York City where I have taught for nearly 20 years after some

years at Saint Vincent College, and after training and working as a psychoanalyst in New York from the mid-1980s on, the climate has changed for boys. In a book I co-edited in 2010, *Engaging College Men: Discovering What Works and Why*, you may read about the efforts that have been under way for nearly a decade at a dozen or so schools to call attention to the disengagement of college males from campus intellectual and cultural life. Today, I will focus on only one aspect of the problem and that is the way in which young males, based on observations of their behavior, seem to experience campus classroom life.

The point of the autobiographical frame was to justify my suggestion that essential and basic things are no different now than they were in 1963, when we the first generation became gendered. Girls think, speak and write differently than boys. My feminist colleagues have repeatedly stated this and they are correct. What are some of the differences? Since no one knows for sure how or what anyone else thinks, we must limit ourselves in this kind of analysis to the differences in the speaking and writing styles of males and females, and given time constraints, I will focus on speaking. (On the matter of writing I will only say that generally boys are not on the track to being a Kierkegaard or Isaac Asimov.)

By the elementary school years boys say less than girls. Most will not go on to make a living talking, as I do. It is as though they had been born in Lakonia, the area around Sparta in ancient Greece whose residents were known for the brevity of their utterances. Like the neighbors of Spartan Greeks, boys are laconic. To exploit the sense of the title of J.L. Austin's book, boys tend *to do things with words*. Early on, their brevity is often confused with reticence. That was understood and accepted by Mrs. Rummel, but in recent years many boys have been located somewhere along the autism spectrum of disorders. Far from being a sign of mental illness, however, I think that boys' terseness is more intelligibly understood in relation to their tendency to move quickly over short distances. They say only what needs to be said, sometimes abruptly and loudly, usually without commentary. They say something to be done with it. In contemporary elementary school classrooms, their laconian tendency has been intensified and being inhibited to say their little bit in classrooms has rendered many boys mute.

Before turning to this tendency among males in undergraduate classrooms and my proposed remedy to the situation that males say less and less in them, let me add a few additional features to my account of boys' (and most men's) speech style. One is drawn from boyhood. Given the wish to show her gratitude to a mother, a girl is likely to say: "Oh, Mommy, thank you, Mommy! I love you so much. You're the best Mommy in the world!" By middle childhood a boy is more likely to find or make something to give to Mommy in return and slip it to her without a word, and without an explanation. My other example is from older men. In my research for today's presentation, I spoke to some male staff on campus (most of them in their mid-30s to late 50s) as they worked on repairing my office door and asked them why they had barely said a word to each other for the half-hour it took them to complete the job. One replied: "I don't have to explain to him how to fix this door; I just show him and he does it." The other one didn't say anything. Is this related to males having hunted together in pairs or groups? In that case, not speaking would have given them the advantage of more likely getting close enough to their prey to kill it. Had they been talking, the animal would have heard them and fled. Take that explanation provided by my anthropologist colleagues for what you will. I prefer another one and that is that boys are socialized to express less of their experience

in particular their emotional life. But since from early in life most of what one wants to report to others about one's experience is about what one feels, not thoughts about climate change or changes in tax law, socialization that limits self-expression of this kind or marks it as potentially embarrassing is ultimately handicapping to boys and men.

But let me now, like the hunter I am said to be at heart, cut to the chase. Given college classrooms with greater numbers of women, what might be the expected response of young men when called on to speak, knowing that the girls who are there with them are not only listening to the content but are judging them as males, that is, as prospective dates or boyfriends or even sexual partners? (This was the case for women were they were the minority in college classrooms.) The high school and college years are critical times for young males in this respect but ours is a culture that still considers articulate self-expression by males—most males—to be unmanly. Moreover, given boys' basic tendency to be terse, the additional effect on boys of being in settings where they may be impressed by how little what little they might have to say will be valued is suffocating.

For a variety of reasons, males now also have a bad reputation that precedes them before matriculating. Sadly, in too many classrooms negative, stereotypic generalizations about males are voiced by faculty and echoed perhaps reluctantly by some female students. Here I invoke what is today called misandry, a generalized contempt for men that has been documented in a series of three heavy volumes (so far) published by McGill-Queens University Press for Paul Nathanson and Katherine Young. In her book, *The War Against Boys*, the philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers has spoken out on a related view of boys, who are now regularly depicted as defective girls, echoing the complementary psychoanalytic disparagement that for a century saw girls as defective boys, based on Freud's view of femininity that in turn echoed a history of viewing females as inferior to males and minimizing their strengths. Happily, we have gotten past all that, but something comparable is now being experienced by boys and young men that girls and young women had to endure for an unconscionably long time.

Given their predisposition to be brief, their sensitivity to the assessment of young women, the negative reputation that precedes them, the onus placed on young males who are as verbal as most girls, and the experience of being less valued and sometimes disparaged in the classroom, boys have gone silent in great numbers. One statistical prediction (for what it is worth) suggests that the last bachelor's degree awarded to a male will be handed over to him in 2025. (That is certainly not going to happen, but the projection indicates the steepness of the trend of lessening enrollments.) What should we do as their professors? What do I do? First, some general recommendations that will provide the background for a review of some of my own practices.

Like my wonderful grade-school teachers, we must recognize the differences between young males and young females in their ways of experiencing the world and expressing what they can of that experience. Second, we must vigorously refuse to sanction or commit acts of stereotyping boys just as we refused to do that regarding girls beginning in the 1970s. Third, we must take seriously the idea that, given some common tendencies, each boy is different. That will account for the fact that *some* boys are very talkative in class. (I was.) Fourth, we must counteract the felt experience of most boys that I have inferred based on their behavior, namely, that many now feel not especially welcome and perhaps even intruders on campus, in the lecture hall, or seminar room. We must openly note

their withdrawal (which has become patent), question it, and encourage boys to speak, not to the disadvantage of any girl's offering a contribution to the discussion but as a corrective to the by now relative quiet of these seemingly autistic boys.

How do I implement these recommendations? I must stress that being a male is relevant to these practices (both for the boys and for the girls, for different reasons and with different effects), but as in the example of my own teachers as a young boy, the fact that they were women was not relevant. Nor should it be in today's college classrooms. (Where I teach, our 100 full-time faculty are exactly 50 men and 50 women.) Only that my teachers as a boy were a certain kind of person who happened to be a woman was relevant. Similarly, a certain kind of male or female undergraduate professor is to be desired now, a person who is as unashamedly male-positive as he or she is female-positive.

I now do for the boys in my classes what I did with the girls in my classes in the 1970s and 1980s when they were entering the disquisitional fray of college life in greater numbers and were often shy, not yet sure if they were welcome. I often now favor the boys as I often favored the girls then. Just as I did not assume that the "co-eds" (as we called them) were less apt and articulate than the boys, I do not now assume that the boys are inept and can't put together a sentence, although that is what, sadly, we have been told in recent years and what their behavior often intimates.

In short, I am male-positive at a time when boys are undervalued as I was female-positive when girls were not yet valued enough on campus. At the same time I remind myself that most boys tend to say less and am content with a brief communication from them. I often have to press them to speak, maybe urge them to say a bit more, and see what I can salvage of what the average sophomore conjures up. I occasionally convey to a class that intelligence is not gendered while hinting that ways of expressing oneself as a male or as a female are gendered, both by disposition and as a result of socialization. I may then do a head count and point to the fewer number of boys in the class. A cursory indication of what is obvious is adequate, unless it has bearing on the topic we are considering (for example, in a psychology class where we might be talking about the play styles of male and female children or the "nature/nurture" debate). These topics may not often turn up in a literature class, but others that are occasions for fostering male-positive attitudes do, as Professor Gouws will describe shortly (see Dennis Gouws, "A Male Positive Introduction to the Victorian Manhood Question," pp. 68-74, present issue).

As you heard in the introduction, I teach psychology and philosophy. So what am I doing at a NeMLA meeting? My second undergraduate major (after philosophy) was English literature and I earned a certificate to teach secondary English in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I used it for five years while a graduate student to teach middle school English. On that authority, I will hazard in conclusion an example of pro-male pedagogic practice from an imaginary undergraduate "Language and Rhetoric" class. (I think it will work just as well in a seminar on "Chaucer" or "Twentieth-century Women Poets.")

Often enough, the Western canon is condemned as being bereft of contributions by women and therefore has been increasingly discarded even at liberal arts colleges. Everything from the pre-Platonics and early Greek dramatists to literature up to 1960 (when gender was invented) was an-

drocentric. So goes the claim. I might respond when hearing this from a bright undergraduate by reminding my class that while the canon was authored mostly by males, these men did not write about *most men's experience* but only about the behavior of that small group of males who were politically powerful as a result of lording it over women, children and *most other men and boys*, and, of course, writing the books about the munificence and magnificence of their own behavior. With few exceptions—found in the work of the poets—the experience of these men (again, I stress, *most men*) has not been explored. Male *experience* (including that of the chief honchos by the way) remains an unwritten text. There is everything to read about their behavior, but scarcely anything about their experience. Philosophy, music and poetry somehow just appear. But as for the experience of the blokes, it remains mostly a mystery. As noted, there are a few exceptions; for example, the work of Herman Melville which Mr. Glover will discuss (see K.C. Glover, “Males, Melville, and *Moby-Dick*: A New Male Studies Approach to Teaching Literature to College Men,” pp. 62-67, present issue). As you will hear, in Melville’s work we find some of the earliest insights into (forgive me) the male soul where experience arises.

I would then say to my class: “Most of you boys in this class will, like me, not gain any power over anyone, especially now when power is allocated more and more without regard to gender. Moreover, you should remember that the power enjoyed by heroes, kings and presidents, bureaucrats and senators did not necessarily imply power over their own lives. But that sort of power is the only real power, isn’t it? If you died in the line of duty as a hero, you were not a man with real power, were you?. Real power—power over one’s own life—has been denied to *most men*, as soldiers, as (until quite recently) the principal wage earners in a household, and as men who gave up much to the benefit of their partners, spouses and children. And, in view of this (to modify a title, the title of a novel by James Agee): Let us now praise most men—not famous men, but most men.” I think this might make the boys in that class feel more positive about themselves and make them more real to the girls who sit beside them and for the most part like them, after all is said and done. And I would say it to all of you here, too.



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