REFERENCES


“Girlspeak” and “Boyspeak”: Gender Differences in Classroom Discussion

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The Problem

Greg was perplexed. As a social studies teacher, he believed strongly in the need for students to participate in discussions to help them understand important concepts. The problem was that his seventh-graders were not communicating well with him or with each other. The boys seemed to talk one way, and the girls another. He was not sure about all the dynamics that were going on in the classroom, but he knew there was a problem. Greg decided to call on a friend who was studying social studies education in a graduate program at the local university. Perhaps Diane could help him figure out what was going wrong.

Diane was intrigued by Greg’s request. She had been doing research on social studies discussion and was looking for a classroom to use for her study. This sounded ideal. The first step was to observe and tape a discussion for analysis. Greg agreed to arrange for a discussion of culture based on an archaeological activity the students had been working on for some time. Diane and Greg chose his first-period class for the study, since it seemed to exemplify the problems he was noticing.

The Discussion

The discussion began with Greg’s asking a question: “Which will change less over time, the physical or the abstract aspects of culture?” Since the students
other." She turned to a segment of the transcript where Barry and Steve were talking.

Barry: Well, I agree with you partly and partly not.
Greg: OK.
Barry: I think that part of it has to do with these people who think about what we will like and how they advertise so that people will like it. But part of it has to be that someone tries it out, and lots of other people like it, so they get it, too, and it . . .
Steve: That's still one person.
Barry: Well, not just one person, but some people try it out.
Steve: That's not what you said, though.

Steve's comment caused Barry to clarify what he was saying, but it was stated as a disagreement rather than support for an idea. After Barry clarified his thought, Steve challenged him again. Diane saw this interaction as different from the collaborative talk of the girls. Greg was not so sure, but he was willing to read the entire transcript to look for other examples. As he was reading, he noticed something he had missed during the actual discussion.

"Look how long I stayed with Jamal on that one topic."
"I was wondering if you would recognize that," Diane replied. "You and Jamal went on for about thirty turns with no one else talking. Do you think that was a good idea?"

Greg thought about it for a while. "I am concerned about that kid. I think I stayed with his ideas because I wanted to draw him out. It seems like the girls don't need to be drawn out because they already talk a lot."

Diane reminded him that there were several girls who never said anything during the discussion and that he had interrupted Pam frequently rather than helping her get to the point by asking the kind of questions he had asked Jamal. "I don't mean to pick on you, Greg," she said. "In fact, studies have shown that the majority of teachers, male and female, give more classroom attention to the boys than to the girls. The difference is that you have noticed it and are willing to do something about it."

"That's just the problem," Greg replied. "I don't know what to do."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are the particular issues that Greg and Diane have raised from their analysis of his discussion? Which are most important? Be sure to include issues evident in the observation as well as in the classroom.

2. Now that Greg has noticed a difference in the way he responds to boys and girls, what, if anything, should he do about it?

3. Should Greg try to get the boys and girls to use talk in the same way? Should a teacher try to change gender-based styles of talk or try to support them?

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4. Is it necessary for everyone to talk during a class discussion in order to learn? In this case, several girls and one boy did not participate in the discussion. How can a teacher know what these students are gaining from the discussion? When do students stay quiet because they do not want to talk and when have they been silenced in some way?

5. What roles can colleagues play in the analysis and improvement of teaching? What makes teaching such an isolated profession?

ACTIVITIES

1. Observe and record a class discussion. Look for patterns in the talk. How many students participated? Do boys and girls get different numbers of turns? Can you spot gender-based differences in the content of the talk? In the ways that teachers respond to boys and girls?

2. Interview students about differences in styles of talk between girls and boys. You might try interviewing two girls together, two boys together, and then a boy and a girl together. Do you notice any differences in what they say or in how they talk that reflect the group's gender composition?

READINGS


