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Assessing Sensitivity: A Critical Analysis of Gender in Teaching Basic Communication Courses

Laura C. Prividera

Some learn and some do not, some progress and some do not, some earn the credentials of schooling and some do not. Some fit schools and some do not. Some few appear especially to prosper as students and as human beings, but many more do not. And many who do not are girls and women. (Stone, 1994, p. 3)

Over the past three decades, scholars have become increasingly attuned to how gender influences individuals’ educational experiences. Sexism, oppression, and marginalization characterize the academic climates for many female students at American colleges and universities (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Campbell, 1991; Carfagna, 1998; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Maher & Tetreault, 1996; Martin, 1994, 2000; Peterson, 1991; Rakow, 1991; Rich, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996; Smithson, 1990; Weiler, 1991; Wood & Lenze, 1991). The differential and unfair treatment women receive in the educational realm stems from a gender bias expressed through instructors, textbooks, and other students. This discriminatory treatment in the academy is the result of traditional patriarchal valuing of teacher-centered and authoritative classrooms, hierarchical relationships, competition among students, and individualistic and rational thinking.
According to feminist and critical pedagogues, our current educational systems are in need of examination, critique, and change if they are to serve female and male students equally and equitably (Belenky et al., 1986; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1996; McLaren, 1998; Rakow, 1991; Rich, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Weiler, 1991). Institutions of higher learning were originally designed by and for men (Martin, 2000); most educational systems continue to preserve patriarchal interests through course content that excludes women’s experiences and teaching practices that exclude women’s voices (Belenky, et al., 1986; Campbell, 1991; Carfagna, 1998; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Hanson, 1999; Maher & Tetreault, 1996; Martin, 1994, 2000; Peterson, 1991; Rakow, 1991; Rich, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Sandler, et al., 1996; Weiler, 1991; Wood & Lenze, 1991). As noted by Maher and Tetreault (1996), “many women students (and some men) have educational values and approaches that are at odds with the assertive, competitive, and hierarchical ideology of the academy” (p. 3). This “chilly” academic environment silences female students thereby having a significant effect on the direction their future careers and lives take (Hall & Sandler, 1982). Gender bias in the academy is particularly problematic as women represent a significant and burgeoning number of students entering undergraduate institutions (Maher & Tetreault, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). One way to address these issues is to incorporate “gender sensitivity” into instructors’ course content and pedagogical practices.

Gender sensitivity “requires careful monitoring of our gender interactions and urges direct intervention
when necessary to equalize opportunities” (Houston, 1994, p. 131). Wood and Lenze (1991) describe gender sensitivity as valuing both men’s and women’s experiences in education through textbook choices, course content, and pedagogical practices. The term gender sensitivity as it is used in this study is not only defined as including gender fairness in the presentation and content of course material but also to include the recognition and criticism of past systems of knowledge that have marginalized women.

Women’s studies scholars have found that women experience a number of benefits in gender sensitive educational environments, including higher levels of self-esteem, confidence, internal locus of control, and academic achievement (Belenky et al., 1986; Carfagna, 1998; Harris, Melaas, & Rodacker, 1999; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). When courses and pedagogical practices are sensitive to the diverse ways in which students know and learn, women and men both benefit. For example, Sadker and Sadker (1994) argue that in gender sensitive classrooms, men may become more adept at expressing emotion and showing care to others. According to Sandler et al. (1996), the content of courses should be gender sensitive across disciplines. Unfortunately, the gender sensitivity displayed in women’s studies programs has not necessarily been seen in other disciplines.

Scholars in the communication discipline have also begun to examine course content and pedagogical practices in terms of gender sensitivity (Peterson, 1991; Wood & Lenze, 1991). Wood and Lenze (1991) argue that “instructors are the most important source of change in institutional policies, attitudes, and behaviors regarding gender sensitivity” (p. 18). Yet, Sprague
(1993) argues that conversations on teaching in the field of communication have become marginalized. In Peterson's (1991) case study at the University of Maine, he found that the marginalization of gender issues was most evident in basic communication courses. Other communication scholars have also exposed the gender bias that imbues communication textbooks (Campbell, 1991; Hanson, 1999) and theories of communication (Bowen & Wyatt, 1993; Spitzack & Carter, 1989). By excluding issues of gender in course content, teachers not only fail to prepare students to contribute to a diverse world but also continue to marginalize many students in their academic pursuits (Elenes, 1995).

Additional research needs to be performed on how gender sensitivity is incorporated into communication educators' course content and pedagogical practices (Bowan & Wyatt, 1993; Hegde, 2000). The communication discipline needs to be sensitive in its representations of gender and scholars must continue learning about how gender issues are perceived, constructed, and enacted in the communication classroom. Therefore, in this essay I explore the following questions:

**RQ1:** How do communication teachers conceptualize and incorporate gender issues into their course content for basic communication courses?

**RQ2:** Do communication teachers who instruct basic courses employ pedagogical strategies that are sensitive to issues of gender? If so, how?
METHOD

The goal of this project was to provide a descriptive analysis of how communication teachers who instructed basic courses conceptualized gender sensitivity in their course content and pedagogical practices. In addition, I was interested in critiquing their perspectives in light of liberal feminist theory so I could advance claims about communication teachers’ gendered ideologies. In order to achieve these goals, I drew on interpretive and critical paradigms of research.

Study Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from institutions located in midwestern communities. I recruited 15 participants from seven educational institutions (five private and two public) offering communication majors. All 15 of the study participants identified themselves as white. Four on my participants were women and 11 were men. I recruited teachers at the rank of assistant professor or higher who instructed basic communication courses such as interpersonal communication, public speaking, and/or the hybrid course. Most of these basic courses were designed to fulfill general education requirements at my participants’ respective institutions.

The five private institutions ranged in size from 1,000 students to 4,000 students. Three out of the five private institutions had a Christian affiliation. The demographic composition of these institutions was fairly
homogenous with a predominantly white, middle class, traditional college-aged student body.

The two public institutions each had approximately 20,000 students. These institutions were more heterogeneous than the private institutions; their students were more diverse in age, ethnicity, and class. However, over 74% of the students at both were white.

**Data Collection**

In order to study gender sensitivity in basic communication courses, I employed in-depth interviews and participant observation. These methods were selected for their effectiveness in gathering descriptive data on how teachers process, view, and incorporate gender topics and sensitivity in their course content and pedagogical practices.

The interviews that I conducted were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis and interpretation. The in-depth interviews followed an interview schedule with approximately 20 questions most of which were open-ended. The ordering of questions varied from interview to interview to preserve the naturalness of the conversational process. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. The interviews yielded 251 pages of transcripts.

I also observed instructors in their classrooms as a complement to the interview data. Participant observation allowed me to experience the classroom as well as my researching role from multiple vantage points. I observed at least three hours of classroom time for each of the participants. To preserve the naturalness of each classroom, I did not audio or videotape the sessions. Rather, I took fieldnotes during and immediately after
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each class session generating 70 pages of observational fieldnotes. The extent of my involvement in each class session was limited as I was situated in all classes as a passive observer.

Data Analysis

My data collection and analysis procedures were influenced by the “constant comparative method” (Lindlof, 1995). Through this method of coding data, I was able to gain a strong sense about how communication teachers conceptualized gender issues in their basic courses.

After my first few interviews took place, I began documenting similar themes that emerged among my study participants. This gave me the opportunity to probe future participants. Once my data collection phase was complete, I reviewed interview transcripts, classroom fieldnotes, and supplemental documents several times. I specifically focused on material that related to communication education, gender, and feminism. In addition, I focused on language that dealt with the following areas: course content, identity, feminism, gender equity, gender discrimination, pedagogical practices, teaching philosophies, stereotyping, time constraints, epistemology, communication climates, language choices, and overall experiences in American classrooms. I identified these areas as central to examine because I see each as relating to how teachers respond to gender sensitivity.

To emerge as a theme in my analysis it had to arise in at least five interviews and/or observations. As noted by Fetterman (1989), studying patterns of talk or be-
behavior represents a form of reliability and “looking for patterns is a form of analysis” (p. 92).

**Thematic Descriptions**

Six themes characterized the way many communication educators treated gender issues and sensitivity in their basic courses. I discuss the themes as follows: (a) historical traditions, (b) course standardization, (c) patriarchal language, (d) neutral positioning, (e) authority, and (f) technological prowess. My liberal feminist theoretical framework influenced the identification and presentation of these themes and the stories they tell. I hope that these themes are read as subjective, fluid, interconnected, and at times overlapping as they are not meant to be exclusive categories.

**Historical Traditions**

The history of communication sets the stage for how knowledge claims are made in our field. Many of my study participants viewed the historical roots of communication as integral to their course content and pedagogical choices.

Will stated, “I frequently joke with the faculty that if I had my way we’d still be using Aristotle’s *The Rhetoric* . . . I’m not sure that we’ve learned all that much since Aristotle and the five canons of rhetoric.” Larry too argued that Aristotle’s principles were central to how he framed his public speaking course. He argued that the only new invention since Aristotle’s profound work was the Internet. The passion of Don’s perspective on the
historical tradition explained what the classics meant to him. He stated, “I rely a lot more on some classical rhetorical canons as far as things that the classical rhetoricians taught and spoke about like Aristotle’s canons, Cicero, Socrates . . . There are certain enduring values . . . of humanity that are no different today than they were three, four, or 5000 years ago.”

Tom echoed some of the previous research participants’ sentiments when he described the importance of the classics in choosing his interpersonal communication textbook as compared to textbooks designed by feminist and critical communication scholars. Tom believed that contemporary textbooks neglected the rich historical tradition of communication. He like the other participants preserved the centrality of the classics. Tom stated:

. . . I will never be a teacher that will go to a feminist interpersonal textbook because to me that neglects . . . all those great things from Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero and all the great people that have studied in communication up until the 80s when this really became popular.

Tom wanted to preserve the validity of traditional communication frameworks in his basic courses.

Men have long been depicted as representative figures of history as well as the public domain (Campbell, 1991; Hanson, 1999). This tradition was reflected in the talk of many of my research participants and it was evident in the choices teachers made with respect to the examples they provided students for public presentations. For example, Martin Luther King (MLK) was identified by almost all participants as the prime example of a persuasive and/or ceremonial speaker. Kather-
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ine described important speaker models as, “... MLK, John F. Kennedy ... or Ronald Reagan.” Will identified representative public orators for his courses as Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, and Abraham Lincoln. As Will spoke about these historic figures he noted that he “used a wide range of video.” Will’s perception that he makes extended use of “a wide range of videos” obscures the fact that his examples were all male. Will, like my other participants, represented patriarchal figures as standard in the basic courses I examined.

Course Standardization

The theme course standardization describes the similarity in how basic course instructors conceptualized their courses. Ben did a nice job summarizing this theme with a response about the extent to which he incorporates gender issues into his basic communication course. Although Ben argued that gender issues were important, he also stated that he frequently does what is easy. “To do what is easy is to present standard courses, in standard ways, covering standard topics, using standard approaches. And I do that a lot of the time and I do it out of an economy of energy.”

The meaning of standard for public speaking classes was simple. Teachers were concerned with student aptitude in composing and delivering informative and persuasive speeches. In the interpersonal communication course, most study participants identified standard topics as the self, perception, nonverbal and verbal communication, language, emotions, and relational communication. The hybrid course represented a combination of these topics with an emphasis on public speaking.
Gender issues were not central topic areas in basic communication courses. Common responses for why were that (a) gender issues were dealt with elsewhere (b) teachers did not reflect on the importance of gender in basic courses and (c) instructors did not have enough time in basic courses to examine these issues.

Almost all of my research participants pointed out that their department offered a specialized upper division course in gender and communication. Many instructors saw this course as an appropriate outlet for conversations on gender. When I asked about the centrality of gender to basic communication courses, Sue stated, “I don’t know that gender should be central. I think it’s an important area. Certainly in upper level courses, certainly in graduate school . . . I’ve got many majors — I wouldn’t make it central. I’m trying to do something a bit more generalist.” Like Sue, Larry stated, “Since we have a course in it . . . I don’t bring it up.” Mary noted that one of her colleagues focuses on courses related to gender therefore it is not something that she spends time with in public speaking. David stated, “there are a number of places where it’s already being addressed and I don’t think I’d feel comfortable making a special point of it in interpersonal.”

David acknowledged that he did not really think about incorporating gender issues into his course. He stated, “I just don’t think a lot about it. Yeah – I’m not very self-reflective on that point.” Katherine expressed similar views to David when she responded to my question about the extent to which gender issues are included in her course content. She stated, “oh my, I may have a big gap there.” Will’s comments were similar to David’s and Katherine’s sentiments. Will noted that
gender issues were “not really relevant to my public speaking course.” Al stated that gender was not something he thought deeply about. “I don’t know. No I haven’t thought of it and no I don’t think of it as much. I don’t think about the different ways that men and women make sense of the world.”

Time was also a common explanation for why gender issues did not surface in basic courses. Katherine stated, “Perhaps I could address it more. I don’t. I don’t do it that much because it seems like there are so many other things that are covered . . . the basics of what a supporting material is — how do you organize this speech, how do you organize the main points.” Will did not see the relevancy of gender issues to basic public speaking and noted that these issues were only addressed “indirectly” in his course. He stated, “but I think that’s the extent to which they should be addressed in the basic public speaking course. Once again you can’t put everything into every course.” With reference to exploring gender in Bill’s basic course he stated, “I don’t know that I necessarily do that . . . there’s really not an opportunity for me to steer them into a proactive . . . gender activity.” Larry asserted that simplicity was most important for his basic courses and he viewed gender issues as obscuring more standard topic areas. Larry stated, “I mean we look at it with regard to audience analysis . . . but we don’t – I don’t say that we belabor it. You have to move the class along as quickly as possible and if we’re going to do this then what we better do is make it as clear as possible.” Time was frequently framed as a way to exclude the discussion of gender issues in basic courses and my participants’ responses il-
illustrated how gender topics were at the margins of their basic course content.

**Patriarchal Language**

Many of the stories of my participants were consistent with the viewpoints of Spitzack and Carter who wrote that, “to examine the language of scholars in the communication discipline is to come face to face with masculine socialization” (1989, p. 21). The theme patriarchal language illustrates how the patriarchal linguistic system was preserved in many basic communication courses. My participants’ responses to gender bias language illustrate this point. For example, Bill stated in reference to challenging the generic use of “he:”

I think that is oversensitivity and I’m not trying to be unkind to females but I’ve never once read the word “he” in a generic sense and thought it excluded women . . . now I try to do it when I lecture. I do try to say “he” or “she” or if I say something where it’s “he” I might say well you know that women too but I think if we try to do that in everything we do everybody’s going to get paralyzed and we’re going to have presentations that are twice as long.

As with many of my study participants, Bill used the conventional system of patriarchal language.

Many teachers noted that it did not bother them if students used language that had a distinct masculine root or bias. Gina stated, “It doesn’t bug me if they do it, because I was brought up in that time when it didn’t make any difference.” Will did not require gender-neutral language in his classes and like Bill, Will provided a justification for why challenging masculine roots were
simply not necessary. When asked how he would advise a colleague who was bothered by gender biased language Will stated:

I guess the first thing I'd ask is whether it's disturbing the class or lessening the students' effectiveness. If not, then maybe we don't have a problem. If you try to force someone – this sentence you use “he” and the next sentence you use “she” and then you're back to “he” and then to “she” you can get very artificial and very weird sounding.

The traditional patriarchal linguistic system was represented as normative by many of my participants.

Some teachers such as Larry, Gina, and Mary reported that they tend to overlook gender biased language. In fact, when I asked about students using masculine roots in language or the generic “he” during their presentations, they said they probably would not notice these behaviors. These teachers also noted that this subject did not emerge in their course content or in their teaching style. For example, Larry noted that he may not catch masculine specific language because the subject is not particularly salient to him. When I asked Gina if this subject emerged in her basic course she stated, “no I can’t say that it has.” Finally, Mary noted that even though she hoped to promote gender-neutral language, she said she frequently misses sexist language practices when they are exhibited.

Most of my research participants were comfortable with patriarchal language practices as they knew them. In fact, a statement requiring gender inclusive language did not appear in most of the syllabi or presentation evaluation forms I examined. Many of my study partici-
pants did not challenge status quo language conventions in American culture.

Neutral Positioning

Many research participants perceived the study of gender as taking a position on social relations between men and women. Therefore, teachers tried to frame social interactions as genderless. Instructors felt that by excluding gender issues from their course content they maintained neutrality and hence they were gender sensitive. The theme neutral positioning illustrates the subjectivity and partiality of teachers' knowledge and experiences with gender issues. “No knowledge or teaching can be neutral because all emerge from some ideological position in society and all influence the development of students in one direction or another” (Shor, 1996, p. 56).

My study participants tended to view questions on gender as exclusionary to men so they felt more comfortable stressing perceived neutral terms such as “human,” “individual,” or “person.” Don displayed neutral positioning when asked about the importance of making concepts from women’s studies a more natural area of inquiry within communication. He stated:

Initially I would say no . . . if we are going to have a women’s area then we need to have a whole section dealing with the man’s area . . . although I can understand if there has been sort of this built in assumption and bias that all previous communication has been from a male point of view. But I don’t buy that argument. I still think we are in the business of human communication.
Will also commented on the importance of responding to others in a “human” or “person oriented” way. For example, when I asked him whether he thought he was a gender sensitive instructor, Will stated, “I think that’s unfair because I’m person oriented. You respond to the individual. You don’t respond to that’s a male or that’s a female.” Like Don and Will, Larry stated, “Hey listen I think everything is women’s studies and men’s studies . . . Why can’t it just be that we study humanity?”

Even though my participants felt they were neutral and gender sensitive, several pointed out that their attention was drawn to male students. For example, Tom and Sal worried that they overlooked male students because they felt that female students were more participatory. Tom stated, “What I’ve noticed here is when I ask a question a lot of times it’s the female hands that go up and not as many males . . . it just seems like the women feel more comfortable participating in class . . . It’s to the point . . . where I’m really worried that some of the guy’s education is suffering.” Sal noted that many of the males in his class perceived communication as “very sensitive, something very touchy feelie.” He further noted that he has tried to “shift the focus” of his course from the “sensitive improvement of relationships” to being a more “effective communicator.” Sal hoped this language would be more inclusive to his male students.

A number of my participants commented on how they engaged in bantering and playful conversations with male students. For example, Will stated, “I guess I would tease a male student more — be a little rougher. I frequently would take a teasing approach to get at some habits that they have to change.” Vincent like Will
noted that his interactions with male students were more likely to take on relational dimensions whereas his interactions with female students tended to be more task driven. Katherine discussed the frequency with which she engaged in bantering with groups of male students. Sometimes Katherine noted that she had to work to calm these students down so they could settle in to her class. Ben shared responses similar to Katherine as he noted that he was drawn to groups of male students by their “rowdy disruptive male gregarious behaviors.” It was clear from my observations and discussions with communication teachers that they were frequently drawn to male students for a variety of reasons. Yet, almost all of my research participants believed they maintained a neutral identity both with how they viewed gender and how they related to students.

**Authority**

Authority describes how my research participants created classroom environments and enacted pedagogical practices that were teacher-centered and traditional. Authority was established through forms of address and pedagogical practices, such as orderly communication climates, structured lesson plans, traditional classroom layouts, student passivity, and lecturing. Even though many teachers acknowledged tensions in positioning themselves as authority figures or using pedagogical techniques that were teacher-centered, many instructors reverted to these practices.

One of the first ways that teachers situated themselves in the classroom was through their own naming process. Most of the teachers in this project used sur-
names and titles for themselves and first names for students. This tended to put distance between teachers and students placing the teacher as an authority figure and knower in contrast to the student who is placed in a submissive and passive position as the receiver of knowledge (Shor, 1996).

Other enactments of the theme authority related to teachers’ implementation of traditional pedagogical practices in the context of their classroom climates and their structuring of lessons plans. For example, Ben noted, “I like an ordered climate. I like a kind of semi-orderly thing and I tend to run things where I’m often the center of attention. . . . I can tolerate a little bit of calling out . . .”. Ben went on to say that his daily lesson plans reflected his interests rather than the interests of his students. He stated, “I like to talk about stuff that I find interesting that I feel very comfortable talking about and that I think is useful to them. The old maxim is that people teach what they know and so I’m attracted to teaching things that I know.”

Bill also discussed how his views of course material affected what and how he taught. “Now I’m not a believer in this trendy idea that students should do all the learning themselves and lecture and the teacher leading the class is passive . . . a lot of my students . . . I don’t think they have the training to be self-directed learners.” Katherine shared a perspective similar to Bill in regards to students’ capabilities as self-directed learners. Her views were best illustrated by how she assigned speech topics for her public speaking course. Katherine explained, “We don’t let students choose topics for the informative speech. This prevents about two weeks of wasted time.” Bill and Katherine demonstrated their
resistance to relinquishing authority because they believed that students could not be self-directed learners.

Gina explained how she viewed students’ learning and the role that she as the instructor played in that learning process. She stated, “I used to think I could have this funnel and drill this little hole and just pour it in but it doesn’t work.” When I asked Gina what does work she indicated “repetition” frequently helped her students remember course content that she deemed important. Gina, also described her preferred classroom climate, “I have the right to require them to do the work I want them to do. I teach to the highest in the class and keep them moving forward and then try to pull the rest up.” Will shared some of Gina’s sentiments with respect to how he viewed students in his class. He noted, “It’s students’ obligation to learn. It’s my obligation to head them in the right direction as to what he or she needs.”

Class after class I watched teachers who clearly occupied their space. Teachers controlled many of the classroom interactions and many students remained passive as they sat in the standard row formation. Teachers were almost always positioned standing in front of the classroom. Some communication teachers positioned themselves behind a podium using the floor space in that region but once again not stepping into the space occupied by students.

Lecture dominated as the primary teaching method in the classes that I observed. Sue stated, “lecture is the basic. What I try to do is have what I refer to as an interactive lecture.” Similarly, Ben stated, “sometimes I just feed them information kind of through lecture and sort of explication and then I try to get them to discuss or comment.”
Even though Ben relied on lecture he also viewed this teaching method as problematic and flawed. He explained, “It puts limits on the kinds of activities they can have.” David experienced tensions similar to Ben when using lectures in his interpersonal class. He stated, “I do depend on some element of lecture. I haven’t figured out a way to get around that.” He elaborated, “I don’t mind lecturing and in some ways I prefer it because at least I can get straight what I want to say.”

As with David and Ben, Tom experienced tensions with lecture and he went to great lengths to try to articulate how lecture was a part of his teacher identity both in terms of how students viewed him and how he views himself. Tom stated, “I’ve found I guess through my years of experience that you have to do a certain amount of lecturing or else a certain amount of knowledge is not going to be gotten across.” Tom also felt that lecturing was a pedagogical technique that students expected. “They look at you like you are not doing your job if you don’t lecture. I mean I feel guilty when I show a good video sometimes because it’s like oh . . . He should be teaching.” Tom located himself as a provider of knowledge and viewed his students as the receivers of knowledge.

The maintenance of authority was accomplished through how teachers’ enacted their pedagogical techniques to convey important communication concepts. Many of the teachers I spoke with were comfortable with authority. I am reminded of Shor’s (1996) self-reflexive perspective on teaching. “Being in control may help my self-image and my professional image, but the truth is that it guarantees nothing about student learning” (p. 106). For those who felt tensions with
authority, they still fell back on traditional teaching methods such as lecture as a way to convey important communication concepts.

**Technological Prowess**

Through the interview process, I asked teachers how they would like to improve their pedagogical talents or knowledge of communication. The most common responses from teachers centered on their ability to incorporate technology into their classrooms. My reasoning for including technological prowess as a theme that relates to gender issues is twofold. First, mastering technology was perceived as a more worthy area to devote time to than gaining a deeper understanding of how gender influenced students’ communication experiences. Second, the perpetuation of technological advancements was indicative of the privileging of individualism and logic – technology has implications for gendered meanings.

In discussing technology, teachers were comfortable addressing their perceived deficiencies or lack of knowledge on this subject matter. For example, Don stated, “I would have to admit that I am somewhat behind the eight ball when it comes to current technology. And I wish I could find someplace where I could go and kind of get a crash course in classroom technology for dummies.” Larry noted, “You have to teach yourself technology. One thing I’d like to do would be to incorporate better the segment dealing with Powerpoint in the class.” Mary talked about wanting to spend a significant amount of time learning new technologies. She stated, “I would like to totally immerse myself in the technology
end of teaching. I would like to spend more time with web assignments . . . I would like to work more on Powerpoint if I ever have an opportunity.” Sal spoke about technology being one of his interests. He noted, “I'm interested in technology and how it incorporates into the learning process. I would want to learn more software that I think would benefit students.” David also noted that he would like to become better acquainted with technology with specific reference to the incorporation of web page usage and design for his classes. Ben too talked about the importance of technology and the implementation of communication courses on line. Technology was revered as one of the most notable ways that my research participants could improve their pedagogical practices.

THE PROBLEM OF PATRIARCHY IN BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSES

I used liberal feminism as a way to learn about whether and how communication teachers incorporated issues of gender into their basic courses. My most significant finding was the pervasiveness of patriarchy and tradition in the talk and teaching practices of many communication educators who instruct basic courses. Even though patriarchy is fraught with bias it functions invisibly under the pretense that its system of organizing is normal. Berger and Luckmann (1967) write that people build societies through patterned interactions and behaviors. These patterned behaviors or habits become “taken for granted routines” and they are often left unchallenged (p. 57). Thus in this study I mark, chal-
I am troubled when I reflect on the words of Spitzack and Carter (1989) that, “the ideology masked in contemporary communication research reflects the history of patriarchy in American culture” (p. 27). Yet, the theme of historical traditions illustrated that many communication teachers valued the public oratory skills and theorizing of male scholars. Although presenting our communication history is significant, it is also important to be critical about the history we teach. Most of my participants did not challenge what the classic material signified (i.e. truth, objectivity, dualistic thinking, hierarchy, and patriarchy) or the impact that it has on teachers’ pedagogical choices. Men represented the norm for public presentations as did characteristics of men’s speech that convey assertiveness, power, independence, strength, and certainty. By uncritically privileging patriarchal values, teachers may perpetuate the mind over the body, objectivity over subjectivity, and rationality over emotions. Positioning knowledge from a perspective of patriarchal privilege may have an adverse impact on women’s learning. Gender sensitivity could be facilitated by problematizing the patriarchal nature of our historical roots.

Women may remain invisible in our field through course standardization that excludes gender issues from the content of our basic courses. Institutions, departments, and students frequently support course standardization as we are socialized for practices that do not disrupt the status quo or the nature of knowledge construction both of which exemplify and preserve patriarchy. However, gender is central to our understandings.
and identities – it forms a solid base for all communicative interpretations and meanings. Yet gender issues were perceived to be beyond the scope of basic courses.

Course textbooks structured the content and syllabi of many basic courses. Many of my research participants did not perceive gender issues to be central topics in their textbooks and teachers did not see the inclusion of gender issues to be a significant criterion in their textbook selection. The findings from a number of studies were consistent with my study participants’ perceptions (Bowen & Wyatt, 1993; Campbell, 1991; Hanson, 1999).

Enactments of gender sensitivity may be more likely if we disrupt the imposed boundaries that course standardization perpetuates. Classroom spaces need to become more active arenas for challenging patriarchal normativity. Critical and feminist scholars frequently use classroom spaces as ways of evaluating and re-evaluating belief systems that create knowledge and social structures (Overall, 1997; Shor, 1996). From my discussions with communication teachers, their course materials were chosen based on the perceived normativity of required course elements so it is these required elements that we must hope to change if we are to create more gender sensitive environments. In order to disrupt course standardization, we also must disrupt discourse practices that reinforce dominant ideologies.

Patriarchal language patterns were preserved in many of the basic courses I studied. Many of my participants did not reflect on the implications of patriarchal language on students’ learning. Students were not encouraged to critique language practices that maintained the universality of men as the standard by which others
are evaluated. In fact, many teachers seemed to find conversations on the male bias in language patterns as being petty or unimportant as these conversations took time away from more “substantive” course material. Yet, language functions as a way to maintain male dominance in our society as the experiences of women are muted by a language not of their creation (Ardener, 1978; Kramarae, 1981; Spender, 1990). Embedded in our language are the cultural values and symbols deemed most appropriate in society. Our language practices do not function equally in men’s and women’s lives as women are marginalized through a language that represents their experiences in inaccurate and biased ways (Kramarae, 1981; Spender, 1990). Students and teachers may continue to preserve patriarchal language practices until we interrogate the routine ways in which language is used.

Many of my research participants did not critique the use of the generic “he” as well as other terms that contained male roots. Yet, when individuals read “he” as well as male specific language, they think and visualize men (Gastil, 1990; Todd-Mancillas, 1981). Although this is not a new finding, I found it is one many teachers in basic courses may perpetuate.

Feminist communication scholars have worked to create new words and meanings that include the multiple ways women learn and construct knowledge (Kramarae & Treichler, 1992). However, few of these studies made it into the content of my research participants’ basic courses. For example, gender inclusive language was not listed on any of the public speaking evaluation forms I reviewed nor did most teachers make this a central area of discussion. Many teachers who
preserved patriarchal principles did so believing that these patterns of interacting were neutral.

My participants spoke from a position where gender was not marked; hence they denied the importance of an analysis of gender and preferred to use phrases such as human and person. However, we live in a gendered society and students are gendered beings (Pagano, 1994). Freire (1993) describes we can never be neutral. Our actions and inaction all convey meaning. The perceived high status of the neutral teacher supports principles such as objectivity, rationality, truth, logical thought, and the mind/body split to the exclusion of subjectivity, multiple truths, emotions, care, feelings, imagination, and the body. These patriarchal principles suit the learning styles of men often to the exclusion of women (Belenky et al., Carfagna, 1998; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Philbin, Meier, Huffman, & Boverie, 1995). “The cultural devaluing of women further complicate the inclusion of feminist and gender studies within the communication discipline because, by having the right to claim impartiality, patriarchal culture hides behind the guise of gender neutrality” (Spitzach & Carter, 1987, p. 28).

In order to promote more gender sensitive environments, it is important to dispel the myth of the neutral teacher. Smith (1994) argues that we are all embedded knowers. By using an outsider perspective, individuals can gain a better sense of their embeddedness or the subjective ways in which they construct knowledge and make claims about our worlds.

Authority illustrated the pervasiveness and dominance of tradition and patriarchy in the creation of the basic course classroom climate. All too often students
remained passive recipients of knowledge, as forums were not created for them to interrogate the structures that keep them voiceless (Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994; Shor, 1996). Course content and pedagogical practices were driven by the teacher, as many students were not empowered to participate in the material they studied. In fact, teacher-centered environments may foster complacency in students where submission to authority is normalized (Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1996; Shor, 1996). Submitting to authority often translates to submitting to patriarchy. Classroom environments that foster relationships in which students feel dominated normalize unequal power relationships that women are exposed to on a daily basis. It is the authoritative habits of teachers in classrooms that need to be challenged (Shor, 1996). Habits such as traditional spatial arrangements, unilateral decision-making, and formalized lectures may foster dominance, control, and inequality.

When instructors work to make classroom spaces more democratic, new possibilities can be opened for teachers and students. Sharing authority through negotiating syllabi and making students’ experiences more central to course content can function to produce more gender sensitive environments (Bogden, 1994; Overall, 1997; Shor, 1996). Democratic environments empower students. Through empowerment, students have the opportunity to develop their voices and perspectives on social relationships and sense making in our world. When individuals are empowered, they can transform themselves and the organizing principles that govern our society (Brunson & Vogt, 1996). Many of my research participants felt that they had to authorize knowledge for
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students to learn effectively. Yet this educational format often has the effect of preventing students from developing the critical skills they need to evaluate practices in the social world. Perhaps one of the most recent ways that educational environments may deny women and men equal and equitable educational experiences is through technology.

The benefits of technology that teachers described lacked a critical or feminist critique of the values that technological environments support. At a surface level, technology may appear neutral. However, embedded in technology are the values of a culture (Pacey, 1983) and those values are gendered (Benston, 1988; Kramarae, 1988; Rakow, 1988). Often, technology embraces the values of patriarchy through promoting individualism, separatism, objectivity, rationality, and logic and ignores women’s ways of knowing that include interconnectedness, imagination, emotions, and the body (Benston, 1988; Kramarae, 1988; Rakow, 1988). Benston (1988) argues that:

Women are excluded from education and action in the realm of technology. They do not have the same access to technology or the same experiences with concepts and equipment as men do. They are not expected to act from a technical view of the world. Instead, women’s world is one of people, nurturance and emotion. (p. 23)

As human interactions and processes become more scientific, women’s ways of learning may become devalued. Scientific viewpoints are associated with patriarchy. Often, all of society is held to a standard that technological inventions achieve without attention to the gendered implications of technology.
The important point to be made with reference to technology is that women’s and men’s experiences and perceptions of technology are frequently different. Thus, “the challenge is to develop a more inclusive understanding of the social relations and ideologies of technological processes” (Kramarae, 1988, p. 7) so that the values and experiences pertinent to men are not favored over other individuals.

Through my thematic analysis, I have shown how gender issues were marginalized and minimized in the talk of many of my study participants. My themes illustrated that gender was not central to many basic courses. Rather these topics remained at the margins of teachers’ course content and pedagogical practices. Leaving gender at the margins results in classroom climates where female students may not realize their full potential as human beings. I argue that communication scholars must mark gender as an integral concept in basic communication material if they are to enact gender sensitivity in the classroom.

**CONCLUSION**

Critical and feminist scholars argue that educational systems are gender biased and this foundation needs to be changed to promote equity and equality for all students. In order for our communication classrooms to encourage students to develop critical perspectives of the world, we must move away from patriarchy as the centering force in our course content and pedagogical practices. I agree with Peterson (1991) when he writes that, “without an institutional focus,” revising our communi-
cations courses to be more gender sensitive will, “remain ghettoized in special courses or programs taught by idiosyncratic faculty” (p. 60). Pagano (1994) writes that, “when we teach, we tell stories” (p. 252). It is my hope that this study encourages communication educators to think deeply about the stories they tell.

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