

A teacher's reflections on gender bias in class

The following experience is from a course on computer game culture. The exam comprised a series of smaller texts. One asked the students to write about an experience in class. Three students wrote about the same experience. The situation concerned gender in computer games. Student 1 (male) felt the issue was ridiculous. He said that we as a race had moved passed all the talk about gender. He moved gesturing with his arms. Moved his head from side to side while sighing loudly. All to place emphasis on his viewpoint on how he felt on the subject of gender in computer games. Student 2 (female) felt differently. She waited patiently on her turn to speak. Quietly she pointed out that she found it troublesome that female avatars in computer games often got more and more undressed while achieving better armour. The opposite, she found, happened to male avatars. As they achieve better armour the more covered and less naked they became. I remember letting them discuss the issue. They seemed able to handle themselves and there was no animosity between them. It was simply, as I recall, just a discussion as so many others. At the time I found it to be a fruitful talk on gender in computer games.

Later, in their exam write-ups I discovered that: Student 1 still found the issue ridiculous. Student 2 wrote that she expected intervention from me. I should have supported her. She felt left alone. At the time I didn't find a reason to do so since she was very articulate. She clearly held her own in the discussion with student 1, who by the way was also disciplined. They took turns arguing their viewpoints. Point being – it was not a heated discussion. Present during the discussion was another student (student 3). At the time he didn't say anything. I was surprised to read his account of the situation in class. He felt that student 1 was very serious, calm, sensible and even demonstrated exemplary behavior while student 2 (female) had been very emotional. It was shocking to read. I had read the situation exactly opposite. The male (student 1) had been loud in voice and body movement, while she (student 2) had been collected, calm and to the point. The incident demonstrates how gender “works” behind our backs. We see and read different attitudes into different wordings, gesturing and intonations depending on gender.

It should be mentioned I don't hold any particular expertise into gender research. The descriptions were from one session browsing through a number of topics the students could choose to explore in their final paper.

I made the mistake to think about the gender subject just as I would if it was on the history of the pencil. Gender is difficult to discuss – regarding gender - it is important to be cognisant about it. And that students can feel very strongly about the subject – way more than when discussing Taylorism. It is important to pay attention and make sure the students don't feel overlooked – especially when the subject is gender. Students can find a subject controversial even though we as educators don't see it.

If I could revisit the episode I would paid attention to and be more sensitive to the how the student perceives the subject matter – and I would do more exercises addressing how gender “works” behind our conscious control. Highlighting that gender isn't “value free” focusing on how gender works through us and finally stressing gender research as an area of insights in its own right.

After thoughts

- What are your thoughts on this situation?
- What would you do in a similar situation?
- How could you support awareness of gender bias or other biases in your own classes?