Interrupting Gendered Discursive Practices in Classroom Talk About Texts:
Easy to Think About, DiYcult to Do

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This study focused on us – a group of university- and school-based teacher researchers and observers – as we attempted to alter or interrupt certain gendered discursive practices that threatened to reproduce some of the same inequities in classroom talk about texts that we had noted in the past, but had not challenged. A feminist theoretical framework guided our use of gender as a lens for examining how particular power relations operating in our classrooms governed how students interacted in their discussions of assigned subject-matter texts. Fieldnotes, transcripts of videotaped text-based discussions, and interviews with students were collected in a graduate-level content-literacy class, a 7th-grade language arts class, and an 8th-grade language arts class. Transcripts of weekly research meetings and narrative vignettes that summarized a series of observations and interviews resulted in multiple layers of data. The findings reported from analyzing these data focus on 4 types of interactions: self-deprecating, discriminatory, and exclusionary talk; and talk that reflected our desire for teacher neutrality. Narrative analyses were used to reveal the difficulties we encountered in understanding and interpreting gendered discursive practices and the insights we gained from studying ourselves.

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A natural curiosity about the differences we make in students' lives is central to what we do as classroom teachers. Whether we teach in public or private universities, in schools designed for youngsters from kindergarten through college, or in alternative settings, we feel a certain inquisitiveness about what our students take away from their experiences in our classrooms. Part of that curiosity has to do with content, but another part has to do with what students learn from the actions and interactions we sanction as we go about our daily routines.

It was the latter that stirred our interest in conducting the present study, the purpose of which was to explore ways that university- and school-based teachers might begin to "interrupt" (Brodkey, 1992, p. 310) discursive practices that have in the past permitted inequities in classroom talk about texts to go unexamined and unchanged (American Association of University Women, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Because we view classroom discussions of text as important sites of investigation for understanding how certain discursive practices sanction socially constructed gender norms (Alvermann & Commeyras, 1994), we were interested in exploring the possibility that such norms might be challenged, questioned, or resisted in ways that would interrupt practices that adversely affect students' participation in discussions.

Our use of the term *discursive practices* stems from what Gee (1990) referred to as Discourse with an uppercase *D*. Discourse in this sense refers to more than just talk (discourse with a lowercase *d*). It involves ways of being in the world that signify specific and recognizable social identities. One way to conceive of Discourse, Gee (1990) suggested, is to think of it as a club "with (tacit) rules about who is a member and who is not and (tacit) rules about how members ought to behave if they wish to continue being accepted as members" (p. 143). Thus, discursive practices refer to the spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how individuals learn to think, act, and speak in all the social positions they occupy in life. For example, we have learned to think, act, and speak like teachers; we have also learned how to be identified as graduate students, women or men, daughters or sons, members of different ethnic groups, and so on.

A Foucauldian perspective on discourse broadens Gee's (1990) definition. According to Foucault (1978/1990), "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (p. 101). Poststructuralist feminists who have taken up Foucault's notion of discourse (Brodkey, 1992; Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1987) explore ways in which gender governs how individuals think, feel, and act. For example, Weedon (1987) applied Foucault's notion of discourse to show that in patriarchal societies day-to-day practices (as well as institutional ones) "discipline the body, mind and emotions, constituting them according to the needs of hierarchical forms of power such as gender or class" (p. 121).

Exploring how teachers come to know and alter discursive practices that are counterproductive to students' engagement in content-literacy instruction is one way of avoiding what Herber (1970) referred to as the dangers inherent in

assumptive teaching, especially those practices that have become so ingrained over time that they are all but invisible. Although the sources of assumptive teaching that Herber wrote about over two decades ago (e.g., teachers' assumptions about the preparedness of students to read their subject-matter texts) differ from those explored in this paper, the insights produced are similar in that they contribute new ways of thinking about instruction and students' engagement in learning with texts. Other findings from studies conducted by Bloome (1987), Alvermann (1995), and members of the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group (Floriani, 1993; Lin, 1993) also attest to the importance of considering ways in which assumptive teaching practices can nullify or seriously reduce students' willingness to discuss texts they are either assigned to read or choose to read on their own.

Although a growing body of literacy research has documented that classroom discussion is one avenue for fostering student reading and engagement in subject-matter classes (Alvermann, Young, et al., 1996; Dillon, 1989; Hinchman & Zalewski, 1996; Moje, 1994), in elementary language arts instruction (Almasi, 1995; Commeyras & Sumner, 1995; Eeds & Wells, 1989), and in bilingual classrooms (Heras, 1993), what is less well documented is how such discussion sometimes perpetuates students' gendered ways of interacting (Davies, 1989b; Moore, 1996). When students discuss, there are tacit language conventions for holding the floor, interrupting others, introducing new topics, and the like. These conventions, bound as they are in certain gendered discursive practices, become practically invisible to teachers and students over time (Cohen, 1994; Guzzetti, 1996). Their invisibility, coupled with the seemingly natural use of sex stereotypes in texts (Penelope, 1988), allows gendered discourse to be reconstituted in each reading. Acknowledging this fact is central to understanding the difficulty in interrupting certain discursive practices in classroom talk about text.

In framing the questions that guided the present study, we drew from our understanding of the research on classroom discussion and our belief that student talk about text provides a viable context in which to study how gender is enacted or performed in routine and largely unexamined ways. We were particularly interested in exploring three questions: (a) What kinds of gendered discursive practices might one find in text-based discussions? (b) What difficulties might arise when teachers attempt to interrupt those practices? And (c) what insights might be gained from the difficulties encountered?

Theoretical Framework

We chose to ground our study in feminist perspectives, because of our focus on interrupting gendered discursive practices that create or sustain power differentials (Lather, 1991; Neilsen, 1993). This focus lent itself to using gender as a lens for looking at issues that go beyond viewing data simply in terms of male and female

differences. Interest in the relation between discourse and gender emerged in the 1970s as part of cross-cultural studies in anthropology (West & Zimmerman, 1985) and included work on sexist language. Although some of this work has implications for the present study (e.g., Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990a), for the most part, recent research on gender and language does not treat sex as an isolated variable. Studies that examined discourse as it operates in particular contexts have shown that it is our varying situational identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class, age) and not our biological sex (maleness, femaleness) that influence language usage.

The role of context in shaping our varying and shifting identities provides a link to understanding how we are constituted in language and discourse. Although this link is revealed clearly in sociolinguistic studies of gender and language (e.g., Leach, 1996; Rubin & Greene, 1991), there have been relatively few studies on interrupting gendered discursive practices in educational contexts. According to Jones (1989), in a report of an ethnographic study of how schooling contributes to social reproduction, "only a relative handful of empirical researchers in education have studied how power relations are reproduced in schools" (p. 20). Included in that handful is Brodkey's (1989) analysis of how teacher and student subject positions were adopted and resisted in literacy letters exchanged between middle-class teachers in a graduate course and working-class women in an Adult Basic Education course. The working-class women resisted the discursive practice of treating issues of class, race, and gender as extraneous to the process of composition instruction.

Because feminist perspectives adhere to the notion that the purpose of research is to change the world, not simply study it (Stanley, 1990), there is a commitment to blurring the distinction between research and social action in order to enact changes in existing hierarchies that attempt to silence those in positions of less power or authority. According to Fine (1992), feminist researchers are committed to breaking the silence so that taken-for-granted power inequities and vested interests are exposed and transformed. From Fine's perspective, feminist research "is at once disruptive, transformative, and reflective; about understanding and about action; not about freezing the scene but always about change" (p. 227).

Central to feminist theorizing are concepts such as positionality (Alcoff, 1988) and perspectivity (Messer-Davidow, 1985). Positionality assumes a political identity that is sociohistorically located – one in which gender is viewed as "an emergent property of a historicized experience" (Alcoff, 1988, p. 431). Feminist methodologies acknowledge that how we position ourselves as researchers and how we are simultaneously positioned by others with regard to gender (or race, class, sexual orientation, and the like) influence what we study, the methods of inquiry we employ, and the interpretations we draw.

Perspectivity also grounds our ways of knowing and interpreting experiences through personal histories. According to Messer-Davidow (1985), perspectivity follows from one's position in any given context. Thus, it was im-

portant in the present study to attend to how an individual's shifting positionality was affecting her or his perspectivity. Perspectivity assumes a knowledge base built on one's experiences, but because such experiences are at best partial and situated, they are never "as unified, as knowable, as universal, and as stable as we presume [them] to be" (Fuss, 1989, p. 114). Hence, as Fuss warns, it is important that we acknowledge up front the socially and historically constructed nature of our findings.

Both positionality and perspectivity informed the criteria we used in selecting participants for the present study and in our choice of methods for collecting and analyzing the data. Following Messer-Davidow (1985), we included people with diverse perspectives, and we inserted ourselves into the inquiry process. We combined close-up data collection and analysis (responsibilities assumed by Donna and Josephine, a graduate research assistant) with a more distant and once-removed analysis (by Michelle, a professor in the same department as Josephine and Donna). At the end of phase one of the study, we selected Sally and David, two middle school language arts teachers, from among those in Donna's content-literacy course who had volunteered to participate in the next two phases. Sally and David were selected because of difference in gender, the ethnic and socioeconomic environments in which they taught, and the potential to engage in interrupting gendered discursive practices in their own classrooms. Sally taught eighth-grade language arts classes in a predominantly European American middle-class suburban community located near the university. David taught seventh-grade language arts classes in a neighboring rural county, one in which the public school system served approximately equal numbers of European American and African American students from lower- to middle-class homes. Although both Sally and David expressed an interest in interrupting gendered discursive practices in their own classrooms, David was the more outspoken of the two; he also appeared willing to take more risks.

It was this joining of multiple researcher roles and diverse participant perspectives that we see as contributing to the study's uniqueness. It is a study of three women (Donna, Michelle, and Josephine), who were interested in feminist theories of teaching and research, and two middle school teachers (David and Sally), who were willing to participate in a feminist research project without necessarily viewing themselves as feminists.

Method

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected and simultaneously analyzed over a 9-month period from March 1994 to November 1994. Data sources included Donna's journal; Michelle's fieldnotes; Josephine's notes and partial transcripts of videotaped

classes; students' autobiographical sketches, two-page reflections, double-entry journals, and copies of their assigned readings; researchers' written personal histories; full transcripts of audiotaped student interviews and research-team meetings; student questionnaires; Donna's and Josephine's fieldnotes of observations in David's and Sally's classes; notes from post-observation conferences; musings in private memos; and course evaluations.

The analysis process was a layered one in that, each time data were analyzed, the texts that were generated as a consequence of that analysis became a new source of data. The new data were then integrated into the larger body of data through the use of narrative vignettes, memos, and preliminary report writing. This layering of the data served several purposes. It compelled us to write early and often, not just at the time of write-up (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1996; Wolcott, 1990), and it provided guidance in modifying the study's interview questions.

Phase I (*Spring 1994*). This phase of the study focused on Donna's content-literacy course, which met for 5 hours one night a week for an entire quarter. The course was designed to (a) integrate literacy theory and practice (including a feminist critique of both theory and practice), (b) promote strategy-based learning with texts, and (c) develop teacher appreciation for middle and secondary school students' natural propensity to talk and socially interact with their peers as they learn the content of their subject-area classes.

Twenty-seven graduate students, many of them practicing teachers, crowded around both the outside and inside of a horseshoe-shaped table. Of the 27 students (23 women and 4 men), 25 were European American, 1 was from China (a man), and 1 was from Taiwan (a woman).

While Donna taught, Michelle took fieldnotes on her laptop computer for 45 hours of class time, and Josephine videotaped those class hours. Students were given the option of participating fully or remaining in class but not allowing themselves to be videotaped or have their talk and work analyzed. All 27 agreed to participate and signed written consent forms after reading a full description of the study. Students' participation involved being interviewed and turning in weekly two-page reflections on the various ways they positioned themselves (or were positioned by others) in terms of gendered literacy practices, assessment, and other course-related topics. Each week, Donna read and responded in writing to their two-page reflections. Students' participation also involved writing about what they were learning in the course and how it related (or did not relate) to their own experiences. This information was recorded in their double-entry journals, which were turned in at the end of the course.

Class began with students orally sharing in small groups what they had written for their two-page reflections. This activity served to link what they had learned from the previous week's class to what they would learn in the present one. Next, Donna gave an informal mini-lecture that introduced students to multiple perspectives on a particular topic and supplemented assigned readings from the class text (Alvermann & Phelps, 1994). Sometimes brief articles or other forms of feminist writings (poems, book reviews, newspaper clippings) were

passed out in class and read by the students prior to their participating in small-group discussions of the material. Other activities included teaching demonstrations by students who had used particular strategies in their own classrooms, 10-minute oral presentations on topic-related materials, and student-led panel discussions on current issues (e.g., assessment practices, literacy instruction in multicultural settings, tracking and other forms of grouping). Students were also given time in class to reflect and write in their double-entry journals.

After each class, Donna wrote in her journal about the events she deemed noteworthy, and Josephine independently viewed the videotape and took notes. When the verbal and nonverbal interactions among the class participants seemed related to one or more of the study's guiding questions or to emerging issues of power, Josephine stopped the video player and transcribed relevant portions of the tape. Similarly, Josephine transcribed portions of videotaped interactions that became the focus of some of our research meetings. Entries from Donna's journal, Josephine's notes and transcribed video segments, and Michelle's fieldnotes were entered into Ethnograph (Seidel, 1988). This computer software program was used to store, organize, and retrieve approximately 1,400 pages of journal entries, commentaries, fieldnotes, student interviews, and transcripts of tape-recorded research meetings and classroom discussions. The numbered-line printouts of these data sources were used during the weekly research meetings to locate and record particular events and statements that we identified as important to our research questions and ongoing analyses. For example, when our analysis focused on Liu-Shih's claim that she perceived certain inequities in Donna's class, we used Ethnograph to retrieve 75 pages of data related to that student's claim. On other occasions, we used the printouts as reminders to locate episodes or segments on the videotapes that would help clarify questions we had about certain events. In addition to the printouts, we relied on Josephine's partially transcribed videotapes and the students' two-page reflections to contextualize our weekly analyses.

In preparation for the weekly research meetings, Donna, Michelle, and Josephine read each other's Ethnograph printouts and commented in the margins about events, actions, and interactions that interrupted gendered discursive practices. They shared these comments at the meetings and raised questions about particular practices they wanted to understand better through further data collection. This sharing of comments created a new layer of data, which was recorded on audiotape and later transcribed.

Phase II (*Summer 1994*). Our research team increased by two members in the summer when David and Sally joined the project. Their understanding upon joining was that they would attempt to identify and interrupt gendered discursive practices in their respective classrooms during the fall of 1994. They also agreed to take part in writing up the final report and presenting its findings at local and national literacy conferences.

Prior to the team's two half-day and four full-day meetings, Donna, Michelle, and Josephine identified a few examples of gendered discursive practices from the data collected in Donna' content-literacy class where Sally and

David had been students. These examples, which included Michelle's fieldnotes, Donna's journal entries, video clips documenting particular discursive practices, and transcripts from subsequent research meetings, were shared with Sally and David for the purpose of exploring together the notion of what constituted certain gendered discursive practices. Sally's and David's comments on the identified discursive practices became yet another layer of data. The session ended with the team discussing strategies that David and Sally might use to interrupt similar practices in their own classrooms.

In other sessions during phase two of the study, team members discussed articles they had read about using alternative forms of data representation (e.g., Richardson, 1993), and they responded to Miller's (1992) views on interpreting gendered views of teaching. They used these discussions to derive implications for collecting and analyzing data in the next phase of the study.

Phase III (*Fall 1994*). From late August through the end of November, Donna and Josephine made weekly observations of text-based discussions in one section of Sally's eighth-grade and David's seventh-grade language arts classes. They alternated these observations so that each observed both Sally and David. As they observed the hour-long classes, they typed fieldnotes on their laptop computers. These fieldnotes, which were shared with Sally and David, became the basis for post-observation conferences.

Donna and Josephine also conducted three open-ended interviews (all of which were audiotaped and transcribed) with four or five students on an individual basis following each of three videotaped discussions in both David's and Sally's classes. The interview questions dealt with students' perceptions of how they participated in discussions, what they liked and disliked about discussions, and whether or not they felt the teacher treated everyone equally. Students who were not interviewed filled out questionnaires that dealt with the same topics as the individual interviews. In all but two cases, parents or guardians signed consent forms that permitted their children to be videotaped. In the two exceptions, permission was still granted for the students to be interviewed and for their written work to be analyzed. Copies of all students' work, assigned reading selections, and notes taken during the post-observation conferences with David and Sally were collected by Donna and Josephine on a regular basis.

As in phase one of the study, Donna, Michelle, and Josephine held weekly research meetings. Prior to the meetings, Donna and Josephine shared copies of their fieldnotes (the same ones they had shared with Sally and David) with each other and with Michelle. The meetings began with discussions of the analytical comments the three researchers had made in the margins of the typed fieldnotes and ended with a sharing of ideas they had garnered from reading feminist articles related to the study's guiding questions. On two occasions (and several times later during write-up), David and Sally also attended the research meetings. When they were not present, their concerns and comments, which had surfaced during the post-observation conferences with Donna and Josephine, were introduced into the ongoing analyses.

This process of creating multiple layers of data took into account the positionality and perspectivity of the different team members. It was supplemented from time to time by the narrative vignettes that Donna and Josephine wrote to highlight events in David's and Sally's classes and to address the study's guiding questions. The vignettes included information from a variety of data sources drawn over time and interpreted through a feminist theoretical framework. Michelle, David, and Sally read and reacted in writing to each of the narrative vignettes that Donna and Josephine wrote. Their written reactions became yet another layer of data that figured into the final analysis and write-up.

Profiles of Participants

Feminist theorists contend that "it is inevitable that the researcher's own experiences and consciousness will be involved in the research process as much as they are in life" (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 58). One methodological challenge that concerns feminists is how to present these experiences without appearing egocentric or letting the experiences become intrusive in the research process (Lather, 1991). Our approach is to present a concise profile of each author participant that was created by blending together all five of our voices – overlapping and for the most part indistinguishable from one another.

Although Donna wrote the first layer of each of the five profiles, Michelle, Josephine, David, and Sally wove their own views into that initial layer, consciously choosing to interrupt the modernist practice that accentuates the individual by denoting *I* as separable and identifiable from *we* (Harre & Gillet, 1994). Readers of these profiles sometimes will have a sense of who is speaking (e.g., when boldface type is used to represent the thoughts of the person being profiled); at other times it will be unclear. By deliberately confounding our voices, we lay the groundwork for the multilayered interpretations that we draw from the data in a later section of the paper.

In retrospect, we asked ourselves, Could there have been any five people more unlike one another than the five of us who participated in this study? Definitely, in terms of ethnicity (we are all European American); maybe, in terms of social class; but not likely in terms of our views on gender and our willingness to consider gender as a pervasive influence in all human relations. Yet we grew in our understanding of each other's gendered views on literacy practices as we became more comfortable exploring the wellsprings of our own ideas about gender and its relationship to power.

David. He told us there are two kinds of teachers. One is the "guide on the side," whereas the other is the "sage on the stage." He sees himself as the latter. As a student in Donna's content-literacy course, he would have liked Donna to act more like a sage on the stage. He preferred hearing from Donna rather than his classmates. **I did not pay tuition to listen to classmates go on and on.**

David's vision of himself as a sage on the stage seems in tune with his

former life as a disc jockey. For 9 years, he was accustomed to playing the winners and shelving the losers. He wouldn't have kept his job any other way. Is it David the disc jockey or David the teacher we are observing? Both descriptions, I believe, imply that David is an actor and performs daily for his students. **How unusual is this? I like the give-and-take with an audience. For me, it's more enjoyable to view teaching as "show business."** And he's good! I think that is one reason why I never voiced any of my criticisms about his tendency to control students' discussions. Why should I criticize something that was working for David and his class? **What exactly was there to criticize?** I feel I have not been honest with David.

I remember being shocked when I heard David say he finds himself having to fight the tendency to call on the attractive, verbose students over the unattractive, passive students during class discussions. Later, I thought it was good David was aware of his biases and wanted to alter them.

At first, I could make no connection with David. However, as I considered all that was written about him and his class, I realized we share a basic need – that of *control*. This need appears to manifest itself very differently in the two of us. David seems to more actively control conversations, and he is forthright in his opinions. I maintain control more passively, quietly, protectively. This control provides each of us a measure of safety that we need – but for what reasons?

Donna. **Who is she?** Donna's ability to appreciate multiple perspectives is a strength. She always wants to know how all of her students view an issue. But Donna sees her ability to honor multiple perspectives as being tied to her ambivalent nature – a part of her life that she finds troubling. **A difficulty I've experienced throughout the study seems tied to my ambivalence about introducing issues of gender and power into students' discussions of literacy. Usually the talkative one, I have at times remained curiously silent in gendered discussions that bordered on the uncomfortable.**

I think Donna's ambivalence reflects her shifting sense of responsibility for individuals she perceives to be temporarily positioned as "underdogs". For example, when she raised feminist issues in class, she worried how it affected the four males. She was concerned that they felt alienated when others in the class spoke disparagingly about practices derived from male-dominated, Eurocentric cultures. At another point in time, convinced that the women in the class needed her support, Donna said, "I must encourage them to stop apologizing for their intelligence and to stop giving away their voices because they feel they talk too much."

I think my concern for those I perceive as underdogs can be traced to my childhood experiences. As a youngster growing up in a working class family that moved to progressively "better" neighborhoods, I grew to dislike and resist the pretenses of the middle- and upper-middle-class families who set the norms in those so-called better neighborhoods. Donna frequently brought up issues of class – first, when we wrote our personal histories, and later during our research meetings. I recall that she said her father organized the first

labor union at the Westinghouse plant where he worked. He was not one to let the powerful run over him or his coworkers; nor is Donna. **Perhaps those early memories of class differences and my father's struggle with those in power over him may help explain the ambivalence I experienced in attempting to interrupt certain discursive practices in my content-literacy course. For sure, whatever sense I finally make of feminist pedagogy cannot be divorced from my sensitivity to class issues and relations of power.**

Michelle. Believing like Simone de Beauvoir (1952) that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 281), Michelle helped us question the gendered literacy practices in David's, Donna's, and Sally's classrooms. She wondered about the feminine side of David **(and I was interested in how he constructed his identity as a man),** the shifting stances toward power inherent in Donna's actions, and the struggles for self-esteem that are just beginning to become a part of Sally's public life.

I did not see this project as an opportunity to convert others to my way of thinking; rather, it seemed to be a place in time where five people could consider feminist issues with regard to gender and classroom talk about texts. I viewed my role as *provocatrice,* because I assumed that my life experiences were different enough from the others to give me a unique perspective on issues of gender. I hoped to bring up ideas for consideration that would otherwise go unexamined.

Michelle seems to be greatly influenced from her experiences as an adolescent when she discovered that learning to play the role of female was fraught with unknowns and possibilities. **To explain this, I quote from a 1969 psychological evaluation: "Michelle is functioning in what is broadly conceived of as normal limits. She is going through a rather difficult time in her life where there are a good many issues on her mind. Some of them have to do with growing up and playing the role of a female." In retrospect, this seems an apt characterization of both then and now. During adolescence, I resisted the shift from playing kickball, baseball, flag football, marbles, and cops and robbers with the boys and girls in my neighborhood to standing on the sidelines trying to look pretty while admiring the boys' talents and prowess. Many of the gender expectations regarding what constitutes femininity and what a woman should desire have been unacceptable to me. Throughout my life, I have been fascinated by the ways in which people challenge and resist normative gender prescriptions.**

Challenging is a word that describes one of Michelle's roles in our research meetings. Michelle thinks differently than I do. Several times when I passively took a back seat, Michelle focused on me and elicited from me additional comments to make sure that I was understood correctly by other members of the group.

Sally. Sally's reluctance (and sometimes more like resistance) in exploring issues of gender with her eighth-grade language arts class may be rooted in parts of Sally's personal life that I expect the rest of us will never know. **Yes, I do resist**

somewhat! I think I see gender issues as no more important than other issues, such as personality type, world view, developmental issues – maybe I see gender alone as too narrow a focus. Also, I think my approach to teaching and my need to control never allows for any honest exploration.

Sally told us that as a child she learned to "make nice" and everyone would be happy. As of late, however, she is beginning to question how her "making nice" is tied to feelings of lowered self-esteem. **I question this "lowered self-esteem." It does not feel good, but at some level I know it is accurate. Two constant messages from my childhood seem in conflict: "You are competent and can do anything" and "How others perceive you is important and therefore a measure of who you are." I'm not sure yet how all this plays out, but it must affect my need to be in control. If my classroom is not in control by someone else's standard, then maybe I will be judged as less competent and maybe it will be true. This may also explain the obsessive, overkill, perfectionist way I approach some tasks. I don't really doubt I can do a task, but I feel the need to do extra as insurance.**

In terms of Sally's goals for discussions of literary texts in her classroom, the importance of accepting and affirming the ideas of others loomed large, both in how she perceived her role and that of her students. She thought of herself as a model for students' discussions. And, although she envisioned discussions in which "ideas I have never considered will be expressed," she was quick to control almost every aspect of small- and large-group discussions. Perhaps she feared that if she opened up discussions she would disturb her calm and peaceful existence at the middle school where she teaches.

Josephine. Josephine, whose laughter and opinions are strong and clear, can (when needed) adapt and get along with just about anybody. Her adaptability and natural friendliness enabled her to deal with the unique position she occupied within the research team. As a former literacy teacher in an alternative high school, she was only 1 year removed from the classroom. Thus, she was able to identify with the majority of the teachers who took Donna's content-literacy class.

As both research assistant and graduate student, Josephine was located somewhere between the professors (Donna and Michelle) and the other graduate students enrolled in Donna's content-literacy course. That location allowed her to hear talk by professors about students and by students about their professors. In short, Josephine was our vortex. As the team member most often charged with relaying messages to and from David and Sally, Josephine was privy to both insider and outsider perspectives. **I like being pictured as a vortex. I have always liked to be in the middle of the action.**

Working and writing from her new found interest in women's studies and feminist literature, Josephine experienced discomfort in her lack of honesty in dealing with David. **When I reread my fieldnotes, I was surprised at how differently I interacted with David and Sally. Two years ago when my family moved**

to Georgia, we settled in a rural area populated mostly by working-class, politically conservative families. My husband, knowing my liberal views, asked me not to make trouble in the neighborhood or at the ballpark where our boys play baseball. I decided to go along with him, for I saw no good reason not to. After all, I only have to play this role occasionally, and like Sally, I purposely chose the more peaceful route. I do not find this at all hard to do, for I learned as a child to be quite good at playing the role of the Southern lady. I think I subconsciously decided to play that role when I visited David's classroom and later wrote up observations about his class discussions.

Interpretation of Findings

In our efforts to understand some of the gendered discursive practices that surround text-based discussions, we found ourselves increasingly focused on the idea that gender is primarily about relations of power. In the beginning, we approached the data through lenses well conditioned to seeing the world in terms of male and female differences. Gradually, however, because Donna, Michelle, and Josephine were reading more and more feminist poststructuralist analyses of gender (Brodkey, 1992; Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1987), they became more interested in understanding gender as representative of power relations and less interested in gender as the social construction of biological sex differences. Viewing gender in this way informed several of our analyses, some of which are described in the sections on discriminatory and exclusionary talk that follow.

We were also sensitive to discursive practices in which self-deprecating and discriminatory talk encouraged sex stereotyping and complaints of unequal treatment in Donna's class discussions. Stereotyping was a problem in David's class discussions as well, but there it seemed more related to adolescents' exclusionary talk than to self-deprecating and discriminatory talk. Finally, because we were trying to understand gender as being primarily about relations of power, we were sensitive to discursive practices in which efforts toward neutrality all too often perpetuated the status quo. For Sally, David, and Donna, desiring neutrality worked against the feminist project as Fine (1992) has described it.

Self-Deprecating Talk

The poem that follows was inspired by fieldnotes taken in Donna's class and by Richardson's (1993) work on poetic representation. Michelle titled it "Sorry Talk" to communicate in a somewhat dramatic fashion how women's self-deprecating talk (words enclosed in quotation marks) works against them by diluting the power of what they contribute to discussions.

Sorry Talk

Glenda says, "I'm sorry but I disagree."
She's sorry.
Faye promises that she "will shut up."
She's sorry.
Sharon confesses she "wasn't going to make another comment."
She's sorry.
Joy admits she "didn't ask that question very well."
She's sorry.
Eileen announces that she's "not very good at this."
She's sorry.
Toni declares she "never spells anything right."
She's sorry.
Sally apologizes for her thinking, "It's not deep like Liu-Shih's."
She's sorry.

Starting with the second time Donna's class met, Michelle began noticing how female students tacitly acknowledged their diminished status by qualifying, or apologizing for, their contributions to classroom talk about the assigned readings. Over and over again, throughout the remaining 8 weeks of class, as Michelle recorded in her fieldnotes what sounded to her like self-deprecating talk, she began to harbor an odd mixture of annoyance and identification. On the one hand, she was annoyed that in a class comprised largely of highly competent, female full-time teachers, former teachers pursuing doctorates, and prospective teachers pursuing master's degrees there would be this apologetic refrain running through their talk. On the other hand, she found herself identifying with these women. In Michelle's words:

> I titled the data-inspired poem "Sorry Talk," because to be sorry is to grieve for a loss or a mistake. When I reread my fieldnotes and the self-deprecating comments made by female graduate students, I grieved a little for them and myself, because to be female in a patriarchal world is to experience a loss of voice and courage, as Rogers (1993) has noted.

The "sorry talk" phenomenon has been identified by other researchers as well. For example, Sadker and Sadker (1994) wrote that "self-doubt has become part of women's public voice, and most are unaware it has happened" (p. 171). According to Lakoff (1975), who identified common speech habits in women that indicate doubt, hesitancy, indecisiveness, and subordination, there are parallels between women's speech and their place in society. Brown and Gilligan (1992) found in their research on young girls' development that 12- and 13-year-olds "interrupt themselves constantly to say, 'I don't know' – sometimes because they genuinely do not know but often before going on to reveal remarkable knowing" (p. 174).

These reports about female speech patterns and the "sorry talk" that Michelle observed can be viewed as documenting a few among the many characteristics women develop because of their subordinate status in the social order. Although we could not help but notice the "sorry talk" in our data, we also recog-

nize that by writing about it we stand to perpetuate an essentialist view of women – something we would prefer to avoid doing. As a concept, essentialism is suggestive of the views promoted by the work of some feminists. This work assumes that women share essential qualities that can explain their ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982) and talking (Tannen, 1990b).

Essentialist thinking among white feminist academics has been criticized for overlooking differences among women, thus promoting the myth that privileged white women's views of the world are representative of the condition of all women. Choosing to focus on the self-deprecating talk we heard among female discussants in Donna's class also puts us at risk of being seen as generalizing too broadly about the loss of voice that reportedly occurs in adolescent girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Rogers, 1993). New research on female adolescent development suggests that (a) African American girls from middle-class backgrounds maintain their strong voice as they move through the teenage years, and (b) only girls with a strong feminine orientation report loss of voice (National Public Radio, 1995). An important consideration in conducting empirical research on gender is Meltzer's (1993) reminder that arguing from either an essentialist or nonessentialist position puts one in "a no-win struggle" (p. 29). Following Meltzer, therefore, we simply state what we observed about women's "sorry talk" in phase one of our study. In no way do we mean to generalize this finding to other classrooms or other groups of females. Witness, for example, the total lack of such talk in phase three of the study.

Discriminatory Talk

Typically, talk of being discriminated against surfaced when students in Donna's class felt unequal standards or expectations were being applied. Liu-Shih, a female graduate student from Taiwan, helped us to think more critically about this kind of talk. One of two students in the class for whom English was a second language, Liu-Shih tended to speak for longer periods of time than her North American classmates. Donna had asked that students limit their special topic reports to 10 minutes, so that there would be time for reactions from the whole class. When Liu-Shih did her report on language and thought, she addressed the question of whether or not one can have thoughts in one language (English, for example) that would be impossible in another language (such as Chinese). Liu-Shih's presentation, which ran well beyond the 10-minute time frame, was identified by David as an example of an inequity that discriminated against him and other students from the United States:

> I think there's another inequity . . . and I've seen this happen in other classes. We have two Asian students in class. Now, 2 weeks ago when I presented my oral report, at 8 minutes the old 2-minute [warning] sign went up. Ah, and I think that all of the American students got the same signal. Now, I didn't keep count of the 10 minutes that went by as our friend from Taiwan . . . who is a super sweet person and very intelligent [talked]. However, I would

> estimate that she probably spoke for around half an hour. I think that there have to be time limits. It's not that she was struggling with the language. I think she's fairly fluent. (Interview, 8 Jun 94)

David's view of the situation was that Liu-Shih was the same as any other student in the class with regard to her ability to meet the 10-minute time limit. To his way of thinking, Donna's treatment of Liu-Shih discriminated against those for whom English is their first language.

In trying to understand what constitutes inequality, we turned to MacKinnon's (1993) analysis of sex inequality under law. She helped us see that inequality is two sided. David's claims about Liu-Shih define the kind of inequality that occurs when someone is treated differently but is the "same" (same, that is, not in a literal but in a figurative sense). Inequality can also be defined as treating someone the same when that individual is different. As MacKinnon has pointed out, establishing what constitutes sameness and difference is problematic and hinges on what is used as the standard or point of reference for making decisions about similarity and difference.

From Liu-Shih's point of view, she thought of herself as being different from other students in Donna's class. She expressed this sentiment to Donna and Michelle on several occasions. For example, on one occasion, Liu-Shih explained that if Donna were to hold her to the same time limits as her classmates, who spoke English as their first language, this would disadvantage her because of the challenges she would have to overcome in first formulating and then articulating her thoughts in English (Interview, 30 Sep 94). Liu-Shih confided that she felt her classmates also thought of her as being different: "For native speakers, the environment is equal for everyone .... But for classmates, I am ... treated differently, or silly. I wonder if there is real equality in America, although they said everyone should be equal" (Interview, Jul 94). Liu-Shih's perception that she was treated differently by her classmates seems to be borne out in Donna's allowing her a considerably longer time to speak and in David's referring to her as "our friend from Taiwan ... who is a super sweet person and very intelligent." Although we did not challenge Liu-Shih's and David's perceptions of what constituted an inequality, the term itself is problematic as pointed out in MacKinnon's (1993) analysis. For the present analysis, however, what was important was David's voiced recognition that Donna used her power differentially. What remains unclear is the relation of David's use of gendered language (in calling Liu-Shih "a super sweet person") to the role power played in the interaction. From our data, gender and power seem inextricably linked in this particular situation.

Exclusionary Talk

David used a variety of materials to engage his seventh-grade students in reading and talking about gender issues. Donna and Josephine observed discussions revolving around sex-biased language in novels, gender messages conveyed in comic books, *Scholastic Scope* magazine's (see Howell, 1994) report on sexual ha-

rassment in schools, local newspaper reports of sex discrimination in high school sports, and Harper Lee's (1962) depiction of Atticus Finch's manliness in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Although David seemed comfortable in introducing these materials, the students in his class frequently resorted to talk that was aimed at silencing or excluding the contributions of one sex or the other.

Lively discussions typically followed readings that dealt with gender issues, and sometimes those discussions carried over from one week to the next. This was especially the case when a student-generated topic or question was picked up by David and became the focus of the next discussion. For example, the week after his students had discussed "Soccer Fantasy" (Howell, 1994), which was a play about a female protagonist who wanted to join a boys' soccer team, David reminded them that during the previous week's discussion Latoya had raised a hypothetical question concerning a male's eligibility for an all-girls' softball team. David told us later that he saw Latoya's question as a means of getting the class to think about "maleness." His decision to look for ways that did not exclude males' concerns when issues of gender were discussed was in response to an earlier meeting with Michelle (Interview, 5 Oct 94) in which she had shared her belief that gender issues are all too often equated solely with women's issues.

After class on the day the students discussed the implications of a boy joining an all-girls' team, David explained to Josephine that he had intended to nudge the conversation toward a more general look at "society's views of men … [e.g.,] how does a person have to act to be perceived as a male?" David's intention to explore gender as action parallels Butler's (1990) thinking that gender is a performance and "ought not to be conceived as a noun or … a static cultural marker" (p. 112). David felt the class "didn't get to this issue because we went around and around on the sports equity thing" (Post-observation conference, 12 Oct 94).

Some of the concerns raised by the students in that hour-long discussion were reminiscent of earlier discussions in which the girls (or the boys) pulled together as a group along sexist lines and then attempted to exclude the other group's ideas. Although a few girls (including Latoya) thought it was fair that boys be allowed to try out for an all-girls' softball team, most of them flatly rejected the idea. Cherie pointed out that an all-girls' team "talks about 'girl talk' so boys would ruin everything." Jim, sensing that he was being cast as one of the villains in the discussion, began to say things that suggested Cherie's exclusionary talk was causing him to reconsider where he stood on certain issues. He stated that a couple of weeks ago he would have supported a mixed-sex team, but now that most of the girls in his class didn't want to let boys play on such a team, he felt confused. Wally added that he felt bad about the situation and that it just showed the "stupidity of women." Jillene retorted that women were not stupid, adding, "It's a proven fact women are smarter." The proverbial battle lines between the sexes were redrawn as each side tried to outshout and exclude the other. The intensity of the students' talk was captured by Josephine's observation that "it [was] all moving so fast and loud" (Fieldnotes, 12 Oct 94).

In writing a narrative vignette to accompany the fieldnotes on this highly charged discussion, Donna concentrated on Cherie's notion of "girl talk":

> Cherie said she thought the girls' softball team talked about "girl talk" – so boys would ruin everything. When Cherie again mentions that the girls talk about girl things, David asks, "What are girl things?" David says that since he is married he knows what girls talk about. Josephine adds [as an observer comment in her fieldnotes that day]: "David, I bet you don't know everything we talk about." (Narrative vignette, 28 Oct 94)

In a written response to Donna's vignette, Michelle further explored "girl talk" vis-à-vis Brodkey's (1989) concept of discursive resistance. Michelle noted that Cherie's purpose in using the stereotype "girl talk" was to protect something she valued (an all-girls' softball team). This use of "girl talk" differs from situations in which males use the term seemingly to demean and essentialize what females talk about when no males are present.

> According to Brodkey [1989], discursive resistance involves "re-presenting a stereotype as an agent in a discourse the least committed to the preservation of that stereotype – as Toni Morrison does when representing Afro-American women and men as the agents rather than the victims of events in her novels" (p. 127). Cherie used "girl talk" (a negative cultural stereotype) to her advantage. Her presentation of "girl talk" is different from the way it is commonly used by males to stereotype the kinds of conversations women have when men are not around. David's claim that he knows about "girl talk" also provoked discursive resistance in Josephine. Her comment suggested that all is not knowable with regard to what women talk about when men are not present. To suggest that it is knowable perpetuates the stereotype that there are certain predictable topics that constitute "girl talk." (Response to vignette #2, 28 Oct 94)

What became increasingly apparent and troubling to us as the year progressed was the exclusionary nature of students' discussions, especially when gender was the focus. Although David seemed to be steering students toward thinking about gender as a socially constructed phenomenon – as in the discussion that involved students' perceptions of how masculinity is treated differently in posters featuring Bruce Springsteen, Prince, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Mr. Rogers – there was a tendency for student talk to slip into stereotypical patterns reflective of gendered heterosexist thinking (Butler, 1990). When this happened, as in the examples involving "girl talk" and what constitutes masculinity, students seemed bent on excluding each other's ideas rather than questioning the source of those ideas and why they might hold currency among their peers.

Desiring Neutrality

Sally's class. To Sally, neutrality meant not having to go against community values. At the time of the study, the school board in the county where Sally lived and taught was embroiled in a bitter controversy over a move by some members of the

community to have certain books banned from the school library. This controversy created considerable tension in the community, which was largely conservative in its outlook on life.

In a post-observation conference following Josephine's second visit to Sally's eighth-grade classroom, Sally said she felt the discussion she had led on John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (1947/1989) a week earlier was "real awkward and real contrived" (Post-observation conference, 13 Sep 94). To focus that discussion, Sally had asked students to consider a series of quotations from the first chapter of *The Pearl*. One of those quotations presented students with an opportunity to explore how gendered ways of thinking and writing can find their way into classroom talk about texts:

> Kino had wondered often at the iron in his patient, fragile wife. She, who was obedient and respectful and cheerful and patient, she could arch her back in child pain with hardly a cry. She could stand fatigue and hunger almost better than Kino himself. In the canoe she was like a strong man (Steinbeck, 1947/1989, p. 677).

Sally directed the class to consider why Steinbeck might have written the description of Kino's wife in this way. Paula, the first student to respond, said Juana (Kino's wife) had the physical characteristics of a man, but still gave Kino the honor and respect he deserved as a man. Sally then underlined the word *almost* and the phrase *like a strong man*. When a student remarked, "almost like a strong man," Sally asked, "Does that get anyone's back up? Does it irritate anyone?" Again, Paula offered her opinion that Juana gave Kino the respect he deserved. At this point, Josephine wrote in her fieldnotes (6 Sep 94), "Do all the students believe that husbands deserve respect because they are men? This is troubling to me. Why doesn't anyone question this tradition?" Another student, Patty, said Juana may have had qualities like a man, but they were also women's qualities. Again, Josephine wrote in her fieldnotes, "What are women's qualities according to Patty?"

A week later, after Sally had read Josephine's fieldnotes, she told Josephine that she was having a problem with the study. Sally attributed this to the fact that gender was not "a burning issue" for her:

> This is not my agenda. This is Donna's agenda. And I was trying to make it my agenda, and it really isn't. I'm interested in it [gender], but it's not a burning issue with me .... and my class doesn't seem to be all that concerned about it. (Post-observation conference, 13 Sep 94)

Sally said she did not feel adequately prepared to facilitate discussions in which her eighth graders were asked to deal with gender-related issues. She also explained why it did not seem prudent to ask the kinds of questions Josephine had suggested in her fieldnotes on her first observation:

> You said, "how about husbands respecting wives?" And that's a great question, but it sure didn't pop up in my mind at the time .... Where do I cross the line in discussing literature and discussing family values and marital relationships that in this community I better stay away from? (Post-observation conference held on 13 Sep 94 about 6 Sep 94 class discussion)

Despite her misgivings, 2 weeks later, Sally attempted to introduce gender once again – this time in a discussion of who was considered the more dominant character in *The Pearl* – Kino or Juana. Most students concluded it had to be Kino because he was the man, and he made all the decisions for his family. Paula explained it this way:

> God created us – the man is the head of the family so that's obviously the way he thought it would work best. But the woman shouldn't be a slave, but the man should have the final decisions in all aspects. (Interview, 27 Sep 94)

Seeking neutrality in situations such as this one seemed the safest route to take, as Sally indicated in a post-lesson conversation with Donna:

> I want to be sure to stay away from any ... discussion of family values that might be a problem in the community. Like, whether or not the male should be the head of the household. I'm not sure I want to tackle that one even though I have very strong feelings about it. (Post-observation conference, 27 Sep 94)

At their next research meeting (19 Oct 94), Michelle, Josephine, and Donna discussed Sally's decision to distance herself from the project's focus on gender. Although they respected Sally's reasons for not wanting to challenge the community's dominant cultural values and beliefs, they wondered among themselves what her decision said about their own preparedness to take on a feminist project that was turning out to be far more complex than they had envisioned. In a slightly different vein, they also wondered how they would reconcile their decision to support Sally in her desire to opt out of her original agreement with their understandings of what it meant to teach from feminist perspectives. Michelle, Josephine, and Donna discussed at some length the bind they were in. To have pressured Sally to stay focused on interrupting gendered discursive practices when she was obviously uncomfortable in that role would have been at odds with feminist pedagogy's ethic of caring. At the same time, to have dismissed Sally's decision as inconsequential to the project's purpose would have been tantamount to denying that "gender matters" – feminist pedagogy's central tenet (Lather, 1991). In the end, Michelle, Josephine, and Donna agreed that the best plan of action was to support Sally as she veered from the project's main goal to explore an interest of her own – that of moving from teacher-directed to student-centered discussions. They reasoned that Sally's interest in finding ways to value student talk about assigned reading materials could still be considered part of the feminist project, which is to share power with others – in this case, the students – who had previously occupied positions of lesser power in Sally's teacher-centered classroom.

David's class. David aspired to be a neutral discussion leader. To him, this meant avoiding ideological stances that might endorse partisan politics or religious agendas; it did not necessarily mean refraining from talk about family values:

> I don't think a teacher should overtly endorse a political ideology or religion. Personally, I think respect for family transcends any political or religious ideology – falls into the category of values education. I don't see how anyone can take issue with that, except satanic cults. (Post-observation conference, 31 Aug 94).

David believed that in striving for neutrality in class discussions he would be interrupting his customary practice of freely injecting his own opinions, a practice that often led to teacher-dominated discussions. Taking a neutral stance, he believed, would also help him remain true to the study's purpose:

> We're looking for biases and how, uh, my biases can influence discussions about texts .... And I just think ... that what we're interested in here is what the children have to say .... I think that what they say will be truer and more authentic if I keep my views out of it and just concentrate on getting them [the students' views]. (Research meeting, 5 Oct 94)

In their early observations and feedback to David, both Donna (Post-observation conference, 14 Sep 94) and Josephine (Interview, 5 Oct 94) commented on what they perceived to be David's success in maintaining a neutral stance during some fairly heated discussions. Later, they realized that their desire to support David had led them to endorse David's striving toward neutrality even though the possibility of David maintaining a neutral stance did not fit well within their understanding of feminist theorizing on positionality. Josephine and Donna began to wonder, "Was David bringing to the discussions on the various reading materials that dealt with gender an interactive style that was more in keeping with his sage-on-a-stage vision of himself than with his newly desired role as a neutral discussion leader?" It seemed so, for how else to account for Michelle's perception that David shared many of his own views on manliness without worrying that he might offend his students (Fieldnotes, 2 Nov 94), or the students' perceptions that David frequently interjected his opinions during their discussions and responded with "right" or "I agree" to their opinions (Interview, 28 Sep 94)? Yet, the students we interviewed said they liked to hear David's ideas and that hearing those ideas did not stop them from expressing their own. For example, Jamaica summarized the situation this way:

> Mr. Hinson's class is the class where ... the teacher actually listens to everything that we have to say, and, um, disagree and agree .... I think Mr. Hinson's class stands out from the rest because we get to discuss, and, um, express our opinions freely. (Interview, 28 Sep 94)

Because David willingly and enthusiastically brought gender into his text-based classroom discussions, Josephine and Donna were sensitive to the need to

monitor students' perceptions of this practice and to share those perceptions with David. Their initial worries about his seventh graders' abilities to handle some rather explosive issues that grew out of their readings on gender did not appear to be something that disturbed the students. Perhaps this was partially due to David's willingness to share his stage with students so they could have more time to express their views.

Donna's class. Donna struggled with the notion of teacher neutrality. On the one hand, she knew it to be a practice incompatible with feminist thinking. On the other hand, she valued it, because it enabled her to avoid expressing personal feelings that could be interpreted as showing partiality to some students while alienating others. Above all, Donna wanted to avoid creating situations in which students were made to feel like underdogs. She was particularly worried that her efforts to involve students in discussions of feminist writings (all of which she believed had implications for teaching content literacy) would create opportunities for silencing individuals in her class who might be unsympathetic to feminist views.

Josephine and Michelle found Donna's struggle to be an interesting arena for exploring the concept of teacher neutrality within feminist pedagogy. Proponents of teacher neutrality as a discursive practice within the larger school-teaching Discourse value it for its role in helping students think independently and critically about the ethical issues of living in a multicultural society (Furlong & Carroll, 1990; Singh, 1989). However, feminist pedagogues, such as Lather (1991) and Gore (1993), view attempts at achieving teacher neutrality as playing into dangerous hands. They see neutral stances as being, first, impossible, and second, undesirable, given their tendency to maintain the status quo. According to Lather (1991), feminist pedagogy, with its emphasis on incorporating the personal experiences of teachers and students in the construction of knowledge, "denies the teacher as neutral transmitter, the student as passive, and knowledge as immutable material to impart" (p. 15). For Lather, then, there can be no such thing as teacher neutrality within a feminist classroom. Nor does the concept of neutrality fit with Gore's (1993) call for feminist teachers to critique existing power structures through "new readings of old texts" (p. 79). For how could this critique be accomplished if teachers remain neutral?

That question arose for Donna each week as she prepared for discussions of outside readings that included feminist articles dealing with some aspect of content teaching and learning. Struggling as she was with the notion of teacher neutrality and her decision to introduce feminist writings into the course, Donna looked for signs of frustration among the students. And, not surprisingly, she found some. David, for one, evidenced such signs in an interview held midway through the course. In David's words:

> Sometimes I find that when I try to bring what I describe as a dose of reality to the, uh, discussion, that people become uncomfortable with that .... I think sometimes the implication is, well, you're the problem, Dave .... I just think that I am almost put into a situation sometimes where people want me

> to feel apologetic for the fact that I am white . . . [and] a male. (Interview, 18 May 94)

Typically, the students accepted what they read or heard discussed about gendered ways of being in the world as "normal" and just the way things are. For example, a few comments were heard during a discussion of Treichler's (1986) study that showed that, although students generally like discussion activities facilitated by their female instructors, they nonetheless judge those instructors as less competent in subject-matter knowledge than their male instructors who lecture (Fieldnotes, 27 Apr 94).

However, when the required readings mixed issues of race and class with gender, students' talk grew passionate. For example, one evening during a panel discussion that dealt with the reasons contributing to some content teachers' low expectations for student achievement, nearly everyone in the class had something to say to two panelists whom the class believed had interpreted the assignment from sexist and racist perspectives (Fieldnotes and videotape, 18 May 94). After that heated and emotional discussion, a few of the students informed Donna in person or through their two-page reflections that they found such talk unrelated to their purpose for enrolling in the course. Although Donna did not change the readings she had selected for subsequent panel discussions, she did note in her journal that students were noticeably more reserved in their comments. A level of discomfort had been reached that was unacceptable to the majority of the class. In fact, several students alluded to this discomfort level in their final (and anonymous) evaluations of the class. For example, one person (Student #22) wrote: "We could speak freely in class, but I noted intolerance by the students to diverse viewpoints. I felt more comfortable when the instructor diffused such volatility" (8 Jun 94). Apparently for some students, at least, Donna was viewed as the mediator in class discussions that turned volatile.

Difficulty in Interrupting Gendered Discursive Practices

As with many things we do in our teaching lives, we found it was easier to *think* about changes we would like to make in our classroom practices than it was to actually *make* them. Some of the difficulties we experienced were predictable, given our personal and professional histories, not to mention our predilections; others were less so. The difficulties we address here are of the "less so" kind. These are the more interesting, we believe, for they are directly attributable to the decisions we made (or failed to make) as we moved through the various phases of the study.

In phase one, the novelty of trying on some new roles captured Donna's, Michelle's, and Josephine's imaginations; yet at the same time, it presented challenges that threatened to confound their ongoing analyses. For example, initially, they had difficulty using gender as a category of analysis in ways that did not

essentialize males and females. They also grappled with the difficulties inherent in *inequality* as a concept. How could they interrupt a discursive practice built on what some students saw as an inequity and others saw as an inalienable right? Attention to issues such as these and to the concerns they had about their new roles resulted in their looking less often and less critically at how (or if) Donna was making progress in her attempts to interrupt certain other discursive practices that they had all identified as problematic. For example, the quarter was half over before Donna and Michelle took steps to change the direction of some of the female students' self-deprecating talk. Michelle invited one of the individuals who figured prominently in the "Sorry Talk" poem to have lunch with her. During lunch, they discussed some experiences in higher education that work against women's self-esteem, and Michelle proposed that these were gender-related experiences. Later, Donna met with the same individual to encourage her to share with her classmates the good ideas she had for restructuring the class's weekly activities schedule. By and large, however, efforts such as these came too late in the quarter and involved too few students.

In phase two, when Donna, Michelle, and Josephine attempted to share with David and Sally the gendered discursive practices that they had observed operating in Donna's class, they realized just how difficult a concept *discursive practice* is. In looking for ways to make the notion of a discursive practice as "concrete" as possible, they managed to simplify it beyond recognition. This resulted in their having to reread and rethink what Gee (1990) and others (e.g., Davies, 1989a; Foucault, 1978/1990; Gore, 1993; Weedon, 1987) meant by the concept. Even so, there were days when they would stop themselves midway through a sentence to say, "Now, what is a discursive practice?" In the end, all five of the authors found it was one thing to know, in an abstract way, that gendered discursive practices are primarily about power relations and the spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how we learn to think, act, and speak in different social situations; it was quite another thing to recognize them as they operate in our everyday lives. The routine nature of such practices makes them all but invisible – and thus difficult to interrupt.

In phase three, there were difficult decisions to make concerning how much authority Donna, Michelle, and Josephine should exert over the direction the study was taking. For example, when Sally confided that she was experiencing discomfort in attempting to point out to her eighth graders how the language of *The Pearl* can reinforce stereotyped thinking about one's worth as a man or woman, the decision was made to back off from the study's original focus on gendered language. In acknowledging Sally's right to avoid issues that brought conflict into her life and possibly her students' lives, Donna and Josephine finished their observations in her room without further reference to interrupting gendered discursive practices.

In David's classroom, the situation was different but no less difficult for Donna and Josephine, especially in terms of knowing when to make suggestions

and when to remain silent. Although David seemed open to their comments and enjoyed reading their fieldnotes, they hesitated to intervene during discussions when students' language excluded others on the basis of their being male or female. For example, when Jamaica bragged, "I think the girls, we're like, we dominate, we rule the class," and Ronnie complained "since we've been talking about sexism, the girls got their own point of view and the boys got their own … [and] we're always against each other" (Interviews, 28 Sep 94), Donna and Josephine avoided calling to David's attention their concern that his attempt to interrupt certain gendered discursive practices appeared to be inscribing those practices even further (see Guzzetti, 1996, for further evidence of this phenomenon). In reflecting on why they found it difficult to express their concerns to David in a direct manner, both Donna and Josephine discovered some things about themselves that led them to question how well they had performed in their first attempts at teaching and researching from feminist perspectives. Like Ellsworth (1992), they had not found feminist pedagogy all that empowering.

Parting Insights

The insights gained from this study have implications for David and Sally as they plan for future classes and ways of fostering students' engagement in classroom talk about texts. There are also implications for Michelle, Josephine, and Donna, who are interested in feminist pedagogy and its role in their lives as teachers and researchers. The following insights, written as first-person accounts, combine the personal with understandings gained from the study. Each author presents what seems of foremost significance after working together to understand certain gender dynamics and power relations that influence classroom talk about texts.

Donna

When we privilege the authority of our experiences such that "who we are becomes what we know" (Fuss, 1989), we run the risk of reifying those experiences. I continually struggled against any such reification. For example, I tried to remain open to the connections between who I am (as represented in my participant profile) and what I have come to understand about the *array* of subject positions that were available to me as I worked to interrupt certain discursive practices within my content-literacy course. The ability to tolerate ambivalence in myself and others positioned me as a teacher eager to understand the multiple subjectivities circulating in my own classroom and in David's and Sally's classrooms. At the same time, I found this ambivalence troubling and the source of most of the doubts I had about myself as an emerging feminist teacher. One of

those doubts had to do with the contradictions I experienced each time I attempted to step outside a self-imposed "neutral stance" to interrupt a particular gendered practice that I had identified in my content-literacy course.

How to deal with my positioning in the class and the role of teacher authority led to still other contradictory feelings. What I had overlooked initially in analyzing the data (and only later realized through additional reading during the write-up phase of the study) was that, in my bid to avoid identifying with a particular position in various class discussions, I had indeed positioned myself – and in a powerful way that made full use of my authority as teacher. And, therein lay the irony, for as Norman Fairclough (1989) would argue, my attempts to stake out an impartial or neutral position in class discussions could be interpreted as using what he referred to as *hidden power*, which is the act of disguising and downplaying one's authority in order to keep it. The realization that I may have relied on my hidden power to encourage students to speak their minds, while I remained "neutral", has given me further pause in considering what it means to teach from feminist perspectives.

Sally

Learning about discursive practices helped me view my classroom interactions in a new light. It encouraged me to look for ways to increase student engagement in discussion. I experimented with many configurations for conducting discussions. My students taught me that, at least in the early part of the year, small groups work best if students can choose the group they wish to join. During one class period, a small group was responsible for structuring the class discussion, including the assignment of groups. These student leaders assigned kids to groups on the basis of friendships. In these groups of friends, there was lively discussion even from the silent types.

A related insight from this project is very personal. I am often the silent type in my graduate classes even though I have many ideas and responses to what is being said by others. I rarely speak up, because I believe my contribution must be of great value, unique, even profound or I am wasting other people's time. In that case, I would be "sorry." I know this is a pattern that began in middle school and wonder how many of my students will still not feel comfortable speaking in front of a large group when they are at my stage in life. Until I participated in this project, I did not see this as a power and gender issue, but as a personality issue. However, maybe the two cannot be separated.

Josephine

As I reflect on the data and on my participation in the project, I wonder about the

premium we place as teachers and researchers on comfort. Donna, Michelle, and I implicitly supported Sally's decision to evade dealing with gender issues when she voiced discomfort with the project's agenda. And I did not share with David some of our misgivings about how gender was being discussed in his classroom because of my desire to continue a comfortable working relationship with him. Donna worried about the comfort level of the four male students and those in her class who were not sympathetic to feminist views. For fear of silencing some, Donna was uncomfortable speaking her opinions in class. The graduate students in Donna's class also spoke of their discomfort during discussions in which students argued from different positions.

Why are we so concerned with comfort as feminist teachers and researchers? Is comfort a necessary condition for learning? I once thought so, but now I am unsure. What would have happened had Donna voiced her feminist opinions loud and strong in a way that might have been more threatening to her students' comfort? And what would I have learned if I had been more honest with David and Sally about our reactions? I can only imagine the kinds of learning and thinking that would have transpired had we interrupted our own discursive practice of establishing and maintaining comfort. Yet, I am unsure if I will be able to (or even want to) act differently when observing in someone else's classroom in the future. I cannot escape my upbringing in the art of being a Southern lady. Southern ladies are polite and respectful to their host. In this research project, David and Sally were my hosts. Had I spent a longer time with David in his classroom and established a closer working relationship with him, I believe I would not have felt like a guest. At that point, I believe I would have been able to voice my concerns more honestly. As a consequence of having participated in this project, I am left with more questions than answers about myself as a feminist, a teacher, and a researcher. I am indeed uncomfortable.

David

Donna, Michelle, and Josephine made a conscious decision to conduct their research outside the boundaries of commonly accepted research designs. On the one hand, their rejection of tradition is refreshing and liberating. However, I think their methodology is vulnerable to validity threats. One year later, I am wondering about statements I made and statements provided by my students. Which ones actually represent "truth?" Which ones are tainted because of how we were sensitized to feminist issues? Regardless of my concerns, I submit that my colleagues have diligently succeeded in being as fair and accurate as possible in interpreting the data.

To me, the great achievement of this research is that two public school teachers were *listened to!* Donna, Michelle, and Josephine listened carefully, even meticulously, to Sally and me. They listened enthusiastically, asked thoughtful

questions, and never inhibited us from speaking candidly and often at marathon length. Hierarchical restraints, real and imagined, were discarded. We worked together as friends and equals. There was none of that "me expert, you lowly teacher" baloney that has historically silenced teachers. Teachers everywhere are being ignored and belittled, intimidated and silenced. Thus, for university researchers to listen, to care – it has been a precious opportunity and a tremendous fellowship.

Michelle

Through my participation in this study, I have realized that there is an inherent flaw with the idea that you can study and alter (or interrupt) gendered discursive practices that perpetuate inequalities in classroom talk about text across three classroom settings in a 9-month research project. Being interested in understanding, challenging, and eventually changing the gendered discursive practices that sustain systems of authority that oppress throughout the world, in different cultures, in schools, in classrooms, and between and within individuals requires much more than could be accomplished through a single empirical research study. What I and my coauthors have learned about the influence of gender, discursive practices, and gendered discursive practices on the language of texts and classrooms has therefore been understandably modest. We have made greater strides methodologically by breaking free of ingrained discursive practices that have long ruled the reporting of empirical research in the field of literacy education. We have created or adopted ways of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and representing findings that are recursive, layered, multi-voiced, ideologically revealing, and personal.

For those who feel a deep commitment to disrupting the concept of neutrality in teaching and who want to alter classroom discourse that is self-deprecating, discriminatory, or exclusionary, there is a lifetime of analysis and action to be undertaken. And this cannot be accomplished simply through our modernist conceptions of empirical research wherein data yield findings that in turn yield prescriptive and definitive implications.

The difficulties we have acknowledged in our efforts to interrupt gendered discursive practices in classroom talk about text are ones that could be addressed only in a longitudinal research commitment. It would require participants who feel passionately about recognizing and changing ways of thinking and acting that perpetuate a status quo founded on the privileging of some at the expense of others. It would mean risking harsh criticism from students, parents, administrators, colleagues, and members of the community-at-large, which eventually could threaten one's teaching position. Those who profess to want to interrupt gendered, racist, classist, or heterosexist discursive practices should realize that this is likely to be a dangerous and revolutionary project if pursued more deeply than we have done.

An Ending That Gestures Toward a Beginning

Although we are prone to resist ending this research report with a unified, coherent, and concise summary followed by implications for educational practice and future research, we will reflect on the value of our research. In coming together to study discursive practices in classroom talk about texts, we forced ourselves to think about issues that often remain unexamined in education. We collected data that helped us identify and examine our assumptions about gender, inequalities, and power relations so that we might make visible discursive practices that are so ingrained that we treat them as if they are natural and normal. In taking up the challenge of understanding how discursive practices rule and regulate classroom events, we worked to understand our ways of being as teachers, researchers, or students and how our shifting positions are gendered and regulated by certain power relations. We are better able to grasp what Weedon (1987) meant when she wrote that "the ways in which people make sense of their lives is a necessary starting point for understanding how power relations structure society" (p. 8). Each one of us analyzed the ways we made sense of our lives and the ways others made sense of theirs. This analysis launched what appears to be an endless journey to uncover how power relations that structure society also structure classrooms, talk about text, and our multiple identities as teachers, learners, researchers, gendered beings, and so on. Through collaborating in this research, we have come to recognize some of the dangers of assumptive teaching in content-literacy classrooms. We have also been as honest and self-revealing as possible in terms of who we are and how we engaged in the research in the hopes that others might be encouraged to take up related projects that study gender and literacy from the perspective of power relations.

Notes

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