
An Investigation of Gender Through Writing

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Whether taking notes in class, answering essay exams, jotting down notes in a journal, or composing out-of-class assignments, writing is the act by which students symbolize their beliefs, feelings, and intentions. It is through writing that students create a record of their thoughts. The purpose of this article is to explain how we used these “records” to investigate student views toward gender in the workplace.

Recognizing that writing exercises often operate in many different dimensions, we developed an assignment which was used in three ways. First, it advanced technical writing skills by requiring students to grapple with word choice, sentence construction, and paragraph structure in order to accurately communicate their ideas and substantiate their arguments. Secondly, because the assignment dealt with the application of specific course materials, it challenged students to recall, utilize, and integrate the concepts they had been exposed to through lecture and reading. Finally, the finished assignment was used as a position of record. Students were required, in class, to revisit and rethink their views, as written, from another perspective. Our desire was to use this third goal of the assignment to investigate students’ views toward gender issues in the workplace.

As the number of working women steadily increases, teachers, researchers and students have been examining the similarities and differences in various aspects of

the job and career experiences of men and women (Hall, 1986). However, from the work we have done in studying the gender issue using written assignments, making gender the intended or immediate focus of such assignments tends to bias subsequent discussions. Students will often tailor their writing to what they perceive to be the “politically correct,” sanctioned position of the instructor or their classmates. Many times they fail to understand or to properly analyze their own position on a given issue. Students are often concerned with appearing correct, as correct is defined by the majority, and, therefore, they refuse to define what they truly believe or feel.

Our exercise explores the gender issue by having students role-play a common managerial situation in which they must communicate, in writing, to both a subordinate and a superior. The exercise includes, within a situational context, a number of incidental gender issues. The goal is to have students write memos to both employee and supervisor, focusing on the message to be communicated to each. In class, we then review and revisit these records of their thoughts through a filter which highlights gender in order to investigate gender differences in these communications and to offer possible explanations of these differences.

Let’s now explore the assignment we used in our classes, starting with the assignment itself. We will then explain how we structured our class sessions in order to discuss the assignment from the gender perspective, offering examples of students’ writings to highlight the variety of gender interpretations. Finally, we will conclude with some of our own thoughts on what we have learned from this study of voice variation, which we presented at the Organizational Behavior Teaching

Conference at LaSalle University in March of 1994.

The Exercise

The exercise presented to our students consisted of a case study in which the students were to role-play a woman middle manager and draft memos to a woman superior and a male subordinate. We analyzed the memos to determine if there were variations in voice and content of the memos depending on whether they had been written by a male or female student. Below are the directions and the case which we presented to the students:

Directions

The following case describes a rather typical situation for middle managers, that of communicating with superiors and subordinates. Assume that you are Meg Davis, a 32-year-old regional sales manager for an innovative computer software company. Using the information available, write two memos. The first is to your subordinate, John Rollins, and the second to Sara Lewis, Vice President of Sales.

The Case

Meg Davis works for ARK, a state of the art computer software design company that continues to face increasing market pressure. Meg joined ARK seven years ago after finishing a masters degree in mathematics. She received numerous promotions and currently works as the Sales Manager for the Eastern Region.

John Rollins is twenty-four years old, a recent graduate with a BS degree in Marketing, and a relatively new ARK employee (less than 2 years).

He works as a sales associate and reports to Meg. John indicated to Meg his desire for advancement. He feels he needs the greater challenge of the position as District Coordinator for Sales to Higher Education in order to grow and develop at ARK. John believes that his extensive experience as the National Membership Representative for his college fraternity and his two years of sales work for ARK make him uniquely qualified for this position.

Sarah Lewis is Vice President of Sales and Meg's immediate supervisor. Lewis was just recently hired. She is the first woman to hold an executive level position at ARK, and, in the short time that she has been with the company, has earned the reputation as a straight, by the book, no excuses, strictly performance-oriented manager. Lewis often refers to herself as having many faults but that being wrong is not one of them.

Meg has just received the quarterly sales figures for her region. They are above last quarter's but below quota. Particularly troubling are John Rollins' results which are markedly lower than last quarter's actuals. Despite John's apparent enthusiasm and his good sales call record, he has not been able to close important new sales contracts. Meg attributes part of the problem to the new sales training program which has been enthusiastically endorsed by Lewis, the VP of Sales. This new approach to sales changes the company's emphasis from customer support to product characteristics.

As a regional sales manager, Meg is responsible for reviewing sales figures and communicating results,

with suggestions for needed improvements, to employees. Meg is also to communicate to Lewis her interpretation of the region's performance, to describe her responses, and to make recommendations for promotions.

The Class Review Session

We used this exercise in two undergraduate classes. One is Personnel Management, a required management course for Human Resource Option management majors. The other course is an integrative course, Work and Identity, composed of both business and liberal arts students. It was interesting to discuss with our students their different perspectives on this assignment. Since some of these students are in the business curriculum, many of them used proper format when drafting their memos. These students had had prior memo drafting experience in the Business Communications course. This had also exposed them to a particular style of communication which may have had some effect on the way the memos read.

One of the things that we were attempting to discover from the students' memos was whether there was consistency in voice variations depending upon a student's gender. It is interesting to note that a majority of the male students in the class expressed the fact that they would simply have told John that he had not met the sales quota and failed to close new accounts, so, consequently, he was not eligible for promotion to District Coordinator. Yet, in attempting to communicate that message, their memos reflected more of a "build him up, let him down, give him hope" style. This is a much more nurturing, caring style, hence, appearing to be the more stereotypically female form of communication. What the male students said they would do and

what they actually wrote are much different. For instance, read the following memo written by a male student:

Interoffice Memo

To: John Rollins
From: Meg Davis
Date: March 1, 1994
Subject: Position Request

Thank you, John, for your enthusiastic offer for the position of District Coordinator for Sales to Higher Education. You have been a hard worker here at ARKand have been beneficial to our success. Being DistrictCoordinator for Sales to Higher Education is a position of great responsibility. In order to give such a promotion, an employee must not only have great enthusiasm but the results to show for it. You have a good sales call record, but there were some importantnew sales contracts that you did not close. If you can show that you can close these new accounts in the future, I will seriously consider promoting you.Keep up the good work.

This does not reflect the attitude of the men in the class who verbalized the position of, "I'd just fire him if he wasn't performing." So just what was happening? Why were the students saying one thing and writing something very different? Did the male students verbally communicate a very hard line position regarding John because they perceived that to be the "correct" answer to, and the proper management style for, resolving the problem? Perhaps subconsciously the male students wrote the memos in a certain style because they were role-playing a woman.

In discussing the memos with the students, we looked at the different dimensions of communication and style. We talked first about individual style--that dimension which makes a person a communicator. Individual style dictates the *way* someone communicates, i.e., the words chosen to express an idea, the order of thoughts expressed, the harshness or softness of tone. It is often that which makes a writer a brilliant author, a savvy reporter, or a magical lyricist.

We all as communicators have individual style. It is the "thumb print" of our thoughts and imaginations. The memos we received from the students were as varied in tone and words and thoughts expressed as the patterns of snowflakes. And yet, there were some common threads which ran through them.

Part of the exploration of the exercise was to ask the students why there were common threads of style evidenced in their writings. Some students said that the fact they were all role-playing a particular person, namely, a middle manager, had some bearing on how they expressed themselves. That is, to get into the role-play, you must try to surrender your own individual style for the style of the person you are inhabiting. They were forced to think like a middle manager and not as a student without manager experience.

This is where our discussion led to a second dimension of communication, namely, the intended **receiver** of the information. Remember that the students were asked to draft two memos: one to John, the employee looking forward to promotion, and one to Sarah, Meg's superior, to tell her that the salespersons' training program was not achieving its expected results.

Now the object of the discussion became: Are there

different styles of communication based on who is to receive the communication? Most of the students agreed that one must be aware of the political nuances (and potential for future career advancement!) when writing a memo to a superior, and more aware of the potential to damage ego, and thus productivity, when communicating to a subordinate. The students did not think that it mattered that Meg's superior is female, or that her subordinate is male, i.e., the style of communication and what was said would be the same regardless of the gender of the receivers.

However, in analyzing the memos we had received from our students, we detected some subtle differences in the style and tone. For instance, one female student, when writing to Sarah, the Vice-President of Sales, regarding the newly implemented training program, expressed the fact that she was soliciting suggestions from the employees on how the program might be improved. She recognized that it is the salespeople who exhibit a company's good or bad sales training program, and, therefore, the company must give the employees the opportunity to make comments on how to improve it.

Two of the male students took quite a different approach. In their memos to Sarah, instead of calling for employee feedback on the program and asking for suggestions for improvement, they **told** Sarah what the problem was with the program and tried to sell her their own ideas on how to fix it. Was male domination of the situation surfacing in the memos even though everyone was assigned to the same role-play?

This leads into the last dimension of communication which is the social element. That is, are there societal expectations of the way we communicate given the topic of the communication and the forum in which

we are expressing ourselves? Here we can explore many different aspects of this dimension, from the institutional or organizational expectations of writing and communication styles, to the potential stereotyping of what "good" communication is.

Is there a gender specific style of management and managerial communications that has dominated American business and culture since the beginning? What are organizations' expectations of management style? Have we as educators, businesspersons and students been conditioned to believe that there is only one way to manage, and do we expect the ever increasing female work population to follow this stereotype?

If we accept the theory that men and women communicate differently, then we accept that there is a woman's perspective in communications that may have been ignored in the business world. Given that statement, then a question surrounding this exercise is: "Did the students take this woman's perspective into account when role-playing a female middle manager and when writing memos to both superior and subordinate? Was gender an issue at all in this situational interaction? Perhaps gender was not recognized as an issue because we have all been conditioned to react as a male manager would react, communicate as a male manager would communicate. Now the analysis becomes, do we see woman communicating in a "man's" language?

Our experience using this exercise was that the students were aware of gender in the case. However, the women generally considered gender to be important. There seemed to be a strong gender association for females. The fact that the students were role-playing a woman in this assignment was enough for most females to be conscious of gender.

On the other hand, male students tended to view the case as gender neutral, i.e., another management dilemma needing resolution. As one male student commented, "a manager is a manager no matter what sex **he** is." Interestingly, during discussion, the question was posed, "Well, what if the characters had been described as only managers A, B, and C; would gender be an issue?" The responses varied, but females resolutely cycled back to the position that if this was assigned as management role-play and they were asked to play a manager's role, then gender would be an issue. It was as if females were refuting the male notion of a gender neutral world of management. For these women, management was genderized.

Conclusion

The goal of our exercise was to get the students to investigate gender issues. When they assumed a role and wrote from that perspective, they gained an understanding of the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, experiences, indeed, the very personality of the "other." Furthermore, when male and female students engaged in discussions about what they had written, they were able to reassess their views and differences towards gender roles in the workplace. It is this writing and review process which has provided insights into the way men and women communicate. Therefore, it is our conclusion that writing assignments can provide a meaningful exploration of gender.

Reference

- Hall, R. H. (1986). *Dimensions of Work*. Beverly Hills, CA; Sage Publications.