Issues of Gender in Teaching and Learning

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When I ask myself—Does gender matter in college teaching and learning?—I come up with two mutually contradictory answers. One is, I don’t know. The other is yes. Because it’s hard to frame an argument around two contradictory propositions, I shall tell you a story instead of presenting an argument. In stories, conflicts and contradictions are allowable and even desirable. The story I’d like to tell is about the ways in which my thinking about gender and teaching and learning has evolved over the years.

The Wellesley Study

I first chose to study women not because I was especially interested in them, but because they were there. I was concerned about learning—more precisely, my students’ failure to learn—and, because I was and am teaching at a women’s college, my students happened to be women.

At the time, I was team teaching an introductory psychology course with my friend and colleague, Claire Zimmerman. Because the class was large, usually between 150 and 200 students, we were forced to do most of our teaching in lectures, a style uncomfortably close to what the revolutionary educator Freire called “the banking model” [1974, p. 63]. In the banking model, the teacher deposits information in the students’ heads, and the students’ task is to store the deposits.

This article is based on an address given at the Eighth Annual Lilly Conference on College Teaching, November 4-6, 1988, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. Because all the research on which this paper is based has been collaborative, my colleagues have been as involved as I in the evolution of the thoughts expressed here (although no doubt they would disagree with some of them). I am especially indebted to Claire Zimmerman, and also to Mary Belenky, Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, and Annick Mansfield.

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The banking image may be too mechanical to capture this process. The women students we’ve talked with tend to use biological metaphors. They speak of teachers “spoon feeding” information into them, which they “regurgitate” on exams or convert into “bullshit” papers. Perhaps the biological model captures the reality more accurately than does the mechanical model, because it involves transformation; what comes out is not exactly what went in.

It became obvious to Claire and me that this was the case in Psychology 101. What came out of the students in papers and exams was distressingly discrepant from what we thought we had deposited. Because we were both cognitive psychologists, we proceeded to intellectualize our frustration by studying the transformations the students made. We began to collect examples of these transformations. We called them “common errors.” Notice that the term “error” implies that we said it right and they got it wrong. As teachers so often do, we blamed the victim.

As time went on, we began to see that these errors were systematic transformations that were not idiosyncratic but common to many students. For example, we learned that when the lecturer mentioned a possibility or made a qualified statement (e.g., “Freud may have come to this conception of anxiety because . . .” or “Freud based his concept of anxiety partly on . . .”), many students, in their exams, converted the statement into an absolute (“Freud came to this view because . . .” or “Freud based his concept of anxiety . . .”). Another example most teachers will recognize is that when we asked students, on an exam, to compare and contrast two perspectives, they gave us two discrete lists. If we asked them to compare and contrast Freud’s and Piaget’s conceptions of children’s play, they gave us Freud’s view, then Piaget’s view. Period.

Claire and I noticed that students in our upper-level courses rarely made these errors. Because we were both interested in cognitive development, we wondered whether we might be looking at a developmental phenomenon. Perhaps the younger students were filtering the lecturer’s words through cognitive structures different from ours and from those of the older students. That is, perhaps in the course of the college years, students changed not only in the amount they knew (the content of their knowledge), but also in their ways of knowing (their cognitive structures). This possibility seemed remote, because we had been taught in graduate school that qualitative changes in ways of knowing (as opposed to quantitative increments in amount of knowledge) ended in early adolescence.

The Work of Perry

It was at this point that Claire came upon Perry’s book, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (1968/1970). Perry was not trained
in cognitive-developmental theory. Although he was and is a gifted counselor and teacher of counselors, his only advanced degree was a master's in English literature, so he didn't realize that no qualitative changes in thinking could occur in the college years. It seemed to him, just listening to students as they came in for counseling year after year, that they did change. So the poor fellow, relying on his own experience rather than cognitive-developmental dogma, just blundered his way into a developmental study.

He and his associates interviewed samples of Harvard undergraduates (140 in all) repeatedly each year across their four years at the college. Since Perry was not trained in psychological research methodology, his interview technique was elegantly simple. After explaining that he was interested in the students' experiences at Harvard, he asked just one standard question, "Why don't you start with whatever stands out for you about the year?" (Some of my more ardent feminist colleagues regard this questions as phallic and prefer to ask, in their interviews, "What stays with you about the year?") The interviewer then simply listened carefully, inviting the students to clarify their comments and elaborate upon them.

On the basis of the students' responses, Perry constructed a scheme tracing the development of what psychologists would now call "naive" or "natural" or "vernacular" epistemology. Perry's scheme defines a sequence of moves through a series of positions from which students view the world of knowledge, truth, and value. The scheme begins with a position he calls "dualism." Dualists are absolutists; they assume that there is one right answer to every question, and they see the world in terms of black and white, right and wrong, true and false. At the next position, "multiplicity," gray areas appear, and there are no absolute right answers. Truth is personal and private, there are as many truths as there are persons, all opinions are equally valid, and everyone is his or her own authority and has a right to his or her own opinion. Ultimately, one comes to the next position and sees that some opinions are better than others and that truth is "contextual," that is, the meaning of a phenomenon depends upon the context in which it is embedded and upon the perspective from which it is viewed.

Perry's scheme seemed to offer a way of conceptualizing our informal observations, so we decided to launch our own longitudinal study at Wellesley. Our main goal at the start of this work was to fill in Perry's scheme. He had given us a schematic, sketchy outline of development; we wanted to flesh it out, to elaborate and articulate it in richer detail. We saw ourselves as Perry's helpers. He had generated the really important ideas; we were just sort of tidying up after him. Gender was not a central concern. In a request for funding the project, we did propose to test the applicability of the scheme to a female sample. But our hearts really weren't in this proposal; we were confident that it was applicable.
Perry himself had already dismissed the issue of gender. Included in his sample of 140 were 28 women, or 20% of the sample. However, in a passage early in his book, a passage I hardly noticed at the time, but which now seems to me remarkable, Perry wrote, "With the few exceptions which will be noted, the illustrations and validations in this study will draw on the reports of the men" [1968/1970, p. 16]. With few exceptions, then, the voices of the women students were excluded from Perry's account of forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years. This is just one of many instances in which, as Gilligan (1982) pointed out, women have been systematically excluded from the stage of theory building in developmental psychology. Nearly always the investigator has been male, and all or nearly all of his informants have been male, yet the theories that emerge from these studies are assumed to apply to all human beings, regardless of gender (or class or race, or even national origin). Perry's book is not called "Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Men"; it is called "Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years."

Perry could reply, however, that he was justified in dismissing the issue of gender. In an attempt to establish the reliability of rating the students' interviews for position, Perry assembled a group of judges and asked them to rate 20 cases of four-year sequences, using the scheme. Included among the 20 were 2 women. [Note that the percentage of women has now dropped from 20% to 10%.] Perry reports that although "the judges engaged in a lively discussion of the differences between men and women" [1968/1970, p. 16], they concluded that these were differences in content rather than structure. It is not clear what Perry means by this distinction. Minimally, he seems to mean that while the women's interviews [note, only two sets of interviews] may have sounded different, they could be coded for position as easily as the men's. The scheme, then, could be seen as gender-fair or gender-blind.

At first, Claire and I reached much the same conclusion in coding our own data. We were able to place nearly all of the women in terms of the scheme, and we observed in most of the women a regular progression, in small steps, across the four years. I say "nearly all" and "most of" the women. In one corner of my office there accumulated an ugly pile of transcripts—we called them "anomalies"—that refused to be wedged into the scheme. What they had to say just didn't seem relevant. So we left them out.

On the whole, however, most of the Wellesley women seemed to move smoothly through dualism and multiplicity into a position Perry called "relativism subordinate." At this position, the student learns that her professors want her neither to accept as truth anything an authority says nor to treat all opinions as equally valid, but to adopt an analytical, critical approach, using the tools of the discipline to interpret and evaluate the material she is studying. Most of the Wellesley women caught on to this approach. They learned to construct complex, contextual arguments and interpretations,
marshalling evidence to support their views. They learned to compare and contrast interpretations. They learned that this was the kind of thinking the professors wanted, and they learned how to deliver it.

So far, the women looked to us like Perry's men. But then things seemed to go wrong. According to Perry, the student sees critical thinking at first as merely an academic exercise and practices these skills only to survive the system, to get good grades. But gradually, through some mysterious, unarticulated process, the student comes to realize that this kind of complex, critical thinking is not just a procedure that professors make you use to solve academic problems. And it is not just the way They—uppercase T, denoting Authority—want you to think; it's the way they—dethroned to lowercase t—think too. The students and their teachers now become colleagues. The President of Harvard welcomes you to the community of scholars, and you become one of them. "The irony," Perry says, "is that in merely trying to conform, the student becomes an independent thinker."

This happy ending occurred for too few of our students, only about half of the seniors we interviewed. The others learned to conform, all right, but they did not become independent thinkers. They remained frozen in a schoolgirl mode, performing the cognitive tasks they were ordered to perform, often with considerable skill, but without joy or conviction and sometimes, ultimately, with despair.¹

In Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), we tell the stories of some of these women. For example, Simone², nominated by the science faculty at her college as the best student of her year, told us that she could write "good papers" when she tried. By good papers, she meant papers that teachers liked. Simone, herself, didn't like them much. She says:

I can write a good paper, and someday I may learn to write one that I like, that is not just bullshit, but I still feel that it's somewhat pointless. I do it, and I get my grade, but it hasn't proved anything to me. The problem is that I don't feel terribly strongly about one point of view, but that point of view seems to make more sense. It's easier to write the paper supporting that point of view than the other one, because there's more to support it. And it's not one of my deep-founded beliefs, but it writes the paper. [p. 110]

Simone doesn't write the paper. "It" writes the paper. The voice that speaks in these good papers is not Simone's. Whose voice is it?

A sophomore we call Katie refers to this voice as the "should-voice." In a paper written for a women's studies class, Katie tells of her struggles with writing.
For years I have been taught in school that in writing academic papers I must strive to be objective, I must avoid the personal, . . . I must not deal with feelings and responses and reactions so much, but rather with ideas and evidence and arguments . . . I must push away the personal voice (and) construct some separate, objective, analytical voice. Yet, if writing is the setting down of ideas, where are my ideas to come from if I cannot allow myself to listen to the personal response?

Katie understands now that her teachers have been trying not to silence her personal voice but only to shape it, so that it communicates more clearly. But writing remains difficult for her.

Writing is still a stage of conflict, a struggle to communicate, with two voices competing for my one mouth . . . The me-voice is loud because it is what I am truly thinking. Yet, the should-voice is strong because it has come from many other people, people in positions of power and apparent superiority, many times, over many years.

For Perry's students, the should-voice seems to evolve easily into a me-voice. But Katie and Simone remain stuck in subordinate, schoolgirl positions, and the me-voice and the should-voice remain at odds. For Katie, the two voices compete, and for Simone, the should-voice silences the me-voice. Both are very able women students, and they are not alone. Another able student, the philosopher Ruddick, writes, "In college I learned to avoid work done out of love. My intellectual life became increasingly critical, detached, and dispensable" (1977, p. 135). Simone appears to have dispensed with hers. During her senior year she aborted her honors thesis, withdrew her applications to the most prestigious graduate schools in the country, and returned to her hometown to marry her high school boyfriend and take a low-level job.

I wanted to understand better this phenomenon of arrested development. What caused it, and how general was it? Did women in other institutions experience the same collision between their own voices and the official institutional voice?

The Project on Education for Women's Development

With questions like this in mind, I joined three developmental psychologists from other institutions, Mary Belenky, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, in a three-year project called "Education for Women's Development," supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). That study led ultimately to our book, Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). We interviewed in depth 135 women varying widely in age, social class, race, and ethnic background, and coming from a wide range of institutions, including elite, traditional colleges; a progressive college concentrating on the arts; an "early college" with entering students two years younger than the norm; low-
residency programs for older students; and an inner city community college. We also interviewed women with little formal education who were clients from social agencies concerned with maternal and child health. This time, the decision to interview women and only women was deliberate. It is a decision we have been challenged incessantly to defend from the very inception of the project to the present day. In our book, we try to explain the decision.

In our study we chose to listen only to women. The male experience has been so powerfully articulated that we believed we would hear the patterns in women’s voices more clearly if we held at bay the powerful templates men have etched in the literature and in our minds. (p. 9)

We believed that if we allowed those powerful male voices to intrude, they would deafen us to the words of the women. When the male voice intrudes, it becomes the standard, and the women’s voices are heard, if they are heard at all, as deviations from the male voice. We wanted to listen to the women in their own terms.

In attempting to understand the women’s ways of knowing, we began by trying to classify them in terms of Perry’s positions. These positions are defined in terms of the nature of truth: truth as single and absolute, as multiple, and as relative to context. The positions we finally defined owe much to and are built upon Perry’s work. Yet, as we read and reread the interview transcripts, we also tried to stay close to the women’s own images. We combed the interviews for what we came to call “growth metaphors,” and one metaphor occurred repeatedly. Over and over the women spoke of their growth in terms of gaining a voice. As in Katie’s paper, these women saw the themes of voice and self and mind as closely intertwined. (Katie’s paper is not just about her problems as a writer. It is about her problems as a person and a knower.) These observations led us to revise our definitions of the epistemological positions to emphasize the source of knowledge and truth, rather than the nature of knowledge and truth. In reading an interview, we asked ourselves, How does the woman conceive of herself as a knower? Is knowledge seen as originating outside or inside the self? Can it be passed down intact from one person to another, or does it well up from within? Does knowledge appear effortlessly in the form of intuition or revelation, or is it attained only through an arduous procedure of construction?

Epistemological Positions

Some of the women we interviewed took a position we call received knowledge. These women, like Perry’s dualists, rely on authorities, although the authorities do not always occupy authoritative roles; some are friends and lovers. The women count on these authorities to supply them with the right answers, to tell them who they are and what they should believe. Truth,
for the received knower, is external. She can ingest it, but she cannot evaluate it or create it for herself. The received knowers are the students who sit there, pencils poised, ready to write down every word the teacher says.

A second mode of knowing that we identified we call subjectivism. Subjective knowledge is, in a sense, the opposite of received knowledge. While received knowers see knowledge as "out there," lodged in the minds of authorities, subjective knowers look inside themselves for knowledge. For them, truth is internal, in the heart or the gut. Truth is personal: You have your truths, and I have mine. The subjectivist relies on the knowledge she has gleaned from her own, firsthand, personal experience. She carries the residue of that experience in her gut in the form of intuition.

The subjectivist makes judgments in terms of feelings: An idea is right if it feels right. For example, in the Wellesley study we asked the students what they did when competing interpretations of a poem were being discussed in English class. How would they choose which one was right? One student said, "I usually find that when ideas are being tossed around, I'm usually more akin to one rather than another. I don't know—my opinions are just sort of there." Another said, "With me it's almost more a matter of liking one more than another. I mean, I happen to agree with one or identify with it more."

Now, it is possible that if we studied men we would find these positions, but we think they might often take a somewhat different tone. For instance, there is in the subjectivist statements I've just quoted a humble, self-deprecatory tone that does not appear in the statements of Perry's multiplist. The male multiplist says he has a right to his own opinion, and no teacher has the right to call him wrong. Some of the subjectivists we interviewed say the same thing. But more often—and very often in the more traditional and self-consciously rigorous colleges—the subjectivists said things like, "This is just [or only] my opinion," and they felt strongly that it would be wrong to "inflict" their opinions on anyone else. I am suggesting that there may be a gender difference at the subjectivist and received knowledge positions. But this is one of those questions I can't answer, because researchers [I and others] are only beginning to use the positions we defined to study men.

I want to concentrate in this article on the position that for many subjectivists, at least at Wellesley, is the next developmental step after subjectivism. We call it procedural knowledge. I want to dwell on this position, because it is here that the issues of gender, teaching, and learning intersect most meaningfully for me. There are several reasons for this. First, I think that much of my own teaching is devoted to helping students reach this position. I want my students to pay close attention to whatever it is we're studying, to examine it seriously and carefully. I don't want them just to swallow my interpretations of an experiment, for instance, but I also don't want them to wallow in their own gut reactions to the experiment.
The women we've interviewed have taught me to respect received knowledge and subjectivism in ways that I never did before, to see the virtues of these positions, and to see them as real achievements, rather than just something to be "gotten over" like measles or chicken pox or adolescence. Nevertheless, as a teacher, I want my students to move beyond these positions. Students who rely exclusively on received or subjective knowledge are not, in some sense, really thinking. The received knower's ideas come ready-made from the professor; the subjectivist's opinions are, as one student said, "just there." Neither the received knower nor the subjectivist has any systematic, deliberate procedures for developing new ideas or for testing the validity of ideas. What college seems to do for many students is to help them develop procedures for understanding and evaluating ideas. Most of the more advanced college students we interviewed had reached the position of procedural knowledge.

Separate Knowing

I want now to describe the two types of procedures we identify in Women's Ways of Knowing. Even after several years of research, when we began writing the book, we saw only one procedure. Now we call that procedure separate knowing. I won't spend much time describing separate knowing, because you know what it is, whether you've heard the term before or not. It's the "it" that writes Simone's papers. It's the "should-voice" in Katie's head—an objective, analytical voice, one that exercises care and precision. Separate knowing is emphasized in activities like critical thinking, scientific method, and textual analysis. Some people just call it "thinking." We used to, too, but now we claim it's only one kind of thinking.

The heart of separate knowing is detachment. The separate knower holds herself aloof from the object she is trying to analyze. She takes an impersonal stance. She follows certain rules or procedures to insure that her judgments are unbiased. All of our various disciplines and vocations have these impersonal procedures for analyzing things. All of the various fields have impersonal standards for evaluating things, criteria that allow you to decide whether a novel is well constructed or an experiment has been properly conducted or a person should be diagnosed as epileptic.

We academicians tend to place a high value on impersonality. For example, some of us pride ourselves on blind grading. We read and grade a student's paper without knowing who wrote it, so as not to let our feelings about the person affect our evaluation of the product. In separate knowing, you separate the knower from the known. The less you know about the author, the better you can evaluate (and, some would say, even understand) the work.

A couple of years ago, a group of us were planning a series of lectures in a team-taught interdisciplinary course, and some of us tried to entice the man who was going to lecture on Marx to tell the students a bit about Marx as
a person. The lecturer argued strongly that Marx's biography was irrelevant to his theory and would only lead students astray, deflecting their attention from the ideas to the man. He finally grudgingly agreed to, as he put it, "locate Marx" within an intellectual tradition. That was as personal as he was willing to get.

Separate knowing often takes the form of an adversarial proceeding—not hostile, of course, but adversarial. The separate knower's primary mode of discourse is the argument. For example, one of the young women we interviewed who was a proficient separate knower said, "As soon as someone tells me his point of view, I immediately start arguing in my head the opposite point of view. When someone is saying something, I can't help turning it upside down." Another said, "I never take anything someone says for granted. I just tend to see the contrary. I like playing devil's advocate, arguing the opposite of what somebody's saying, thinking of exceptions to what the person has said or thinking of a different train of logic." These young women are playing what the writer Elbow (1973) calls "the doubting game." They think up opposing positions. They look for what is wrong with whatever it is they are examining. It could be a text or a painting or a person or anything at all.

Teachers report that they often have trouble inducing their women students to play the doubting game. In Women's Ways of Knowing, we tell a story told to us by a sophomore, about a time when, as she put it, the professor "gave" the class his interpretation of James' novel, which she referred to as The Turning [sic] of the Screw. Everyone silently, dutifully wrote it down. The professor, exasperated, tossed his notes into the air and said, "Listen. This is just my interpretation. You should be ripping it apart. You're just sitting there. Come on, start ripping at it." But the student was unable to rip into it. "Basically," she said, "I agreed with it."

Michael Gorra, an assistant professor of English at Smith College, a women's college, tells a similar story in an article in The New York Times called, "Learning to Hear the Small, Soft Voices" (1988). Gorra complains that he has trouble getting a class discussion off the ground, because the students refuse to argue, either with him or with one another. He tells about a recent incident in which two students, one speaking right after the other, offered diametrically opposed readings of an Auden poem.

The second student didn't define her interpretation against her predecessor's, as I think a man would have. She didn't begin by saying, "I don't agree with that." She betrayed no awareness that she had disagreed with her classmate, and seemed surprised when I pointed it out. [p. 32]

Gorra has found the feminist poet Rich helpful in trying to understand this phenomenon. In an essay called, "Taking Women Students Seriously" (1979), Rich says that women have been taught since early childhood to speak in "small, soft voices" [p. 243]. Gorra adds:
Our students still suffer, even at a women's college, from the lessons Rich says women are taught about unfemininity of assertiveness. They are uneasy with the prospect of having to defend their opinions, not only against my own devil's advocacy, but against each other. They would rather not speak if speaking means breaking with their classmates' consensus. Yet that consensus is usually more emotion, a matter of tone, than it is intellectual. [p. 32]

Like Gorra, I teach at a women's college, and I have had experiences similar to his. Once upon a time, I would have described them in the same way he does, but my research has led me to see these situations somewhat differently. It is not that I don't sympathize with him. I do, and I value what he's trying to teach. Critical thinking is obviously of great importance. It allows you to criticize your own and other people's thinking. Without it, you couldn't write a second draft of your paper; the first draft would look just fine. Without it, you're unable to marshall a convincing argument or to detect a specious one. Separate knowing is a powerful way of knowing.

Furthermore, argument is a powerful mode of discourse. We all need to know how to use it. Our interviews—particularly, in research going on now—confirm Gorra's sense that many young women are reluctant to engage in argument. I agree, and so would many of the women, that this is a limitation. But argument is not the only form of dialogue. If asked to engage in other types of conversation—to speak in a different voice, to borrow Gilligan's phrase (1982)—we found that women can speak with eloquence and strength. Gorra may not know about this different voice, as I didn't, because, like many professors, he doesn't invite it to speak in his classroom. In Gorra's classroom, as in many classrooms run by teachers who pride themselves on encouraging discussion, discussion means disagreement, and the student has two choices: to disagree or to remain silent. To get a somewhat different slant on the problem, Gorra might want to dip into another of Rich's essays, "Toward a Women-centered University" (1979). In it she says that our educational practice is founded upon a "masculine, adversarial form of discourse" [p. 138]. Here, Rich defines the problem of silence not as a deficiency in women, but as a limitation in our educational institutions.

I agree. Argument is the only style of discourse that has found much favor in the groves of academe. But there is a different voice.

Connected Knowing

In the Wellesley study, we asked undergraduate women to respond to comments made by other undergraduates. Among other things, we asked them to read the comment I quoted earlier, "As soon as someone tells me his point of view, I immediately start arguing in my head the opposite point of view." We asked them to tell us what they thought about it. Most of them said they didn't like it much, and they didn't do it much.
These women could recognize disagreement, all right, but they didn’t deal with disagreement by arguing. For instance, a woman we call Grace said that when she disagreed with someone, she didn’t start arguing in her head; she started trying to imagine herself into the person’s situation. She said, “I sort of fit myself into it in my mind, and then I say, I see what you mean.” She added, “There’s this initial point where I kind of go into the story, you know? And become like Alice in Wonderland falling down the well.”

It took Claire and me a long time to hear what Grace was saying. We thought at the time that she was just revealing her inability to engage in critical thinking. To us, her comment indicated not the presence of a different way of thinking but the absence of any kind of thinking, not a difference but a deficiency. Now we see it as an instance of a genuine procedure. We call it connected knowing, and, as we go back over the interviews we have done with women over the years, we find it everywhere. We find it, for example, in that ugly pile of interviews in the corner of my office that we were unable to code. Further, we understand why many women have a proclivity toward connected knowing.

Here is an especially clear illustration of connected knowing, from a college student we call Priscilla:

When I have an idea about something, and it differs from the way another person’s thinking about it, I’ll usually try to look at it from that person’s point of view, see how they could say that, why they think they’re right, why it makes sense.

Now, contrast this quotation with those illustrating separate knowing. When you play devil’s advocate, you take a position contrary to the other person’s, even when you agree with it, even when it seems intuitively right. Priscilla turns this upside down. She allies herself with the other person’s position even when she disagrees with it. Another student illustrates the same point. This woman said she seldom played devil’s advocate. She said, “I’m usually a little bit of a chameleon. I really try to look for pieces of truth in what the person says, instead of going contrary to him. Sort of collaborate with him.”

These women are playing what Elbow (1973) calls “the believing game.” Instead of looking for what’s wrong with the other person’s idea, they try to see why it makes sense, how it might be right. Connected knowers are not dispassionate, unbiased observers; they deliberately bias themselves in favor of the thing they are examining. They try to get right inside it, to form an intimate attachment to it. This imaginative attachment is at the heart of connected knowing. Priscilla tries to get behind the other person’s eyes, “to look at it from that person’s point of view.” This is what Elbow means by “believe.” You must suspend your disbelief, put your own views aside, and try to see the logic in the idea. You need not ultimately agree with it. But while you are entertaining it, you must, as Elbow says, “say yes to it.” You must empathize
with it, feel and think with the person who created it. Emotion is not outlawed, as in separate knowing. But reason is also present. The self is not obliterated. You use your own experience as a means of understanding what produced the idea you are attempting to understand.

The connected knower believes that in order to understand what a person is saying, one must adopt the person's own terms. One must refrain from judgment. In this sense, connected knowing is uncritical. But it is not unthinking; it is a personal way of thinking, and it involves feeling. The connected knower takes a personal approach even to an impersonal thing like a philosophical treatise. She treats the text, as one Wellesley student put it, "as if it were a friend." In Buber's terms (1970), the text is a "thou," a subject, rather than an "it," an object of analysis.

So, while the separate knower takes nothing at face value, the connected knower, in a sense, takes everything at face value. She doesn't try to evaluate the perspective she is examining; she tries to understand it. She does not ask whether it is right; she asks what it means. When she says, Why do you think that? she doesn't mean, What evidence do you have to back that up? She means, What in your experience led you to that position? She is looking for the story behind the idea. The voice of separate knowing is argument; the voice of connected knowing is a narrative voice.

Women spend a lot of time sharing stories of their experience. It sometimes seemed to us that first-year college students spent most of their time this way. This may help to account for the fact that many studies of intellectual development among college students show that the major growth occurs during the first year.

We call these conversations connected conversations. These conversations may begin rather like clinical interviews. In this sort of interviewing, a still, soft voice is an asset. The skilled interviewer says little; mainly, she listens. But the listening is active, although it may appear passive. The skilled interviewer offers support and invites elaboration at the proper moment. If we cultivate and nourish our students' skills in connected knowing, students can begin to engage in fully mutual connected knowing, in which each person serves as midwife to each other person's thoughts, and each builds on the other's ideas. Some of the women we interviewed cherished memories of class discussions that took this form, with students and teachers drawing out and entering into one another's ideas, elaborating upon them, and building together a truth none could have constructed alone.

**Gender in the Academy**

Let me make some points of clarification. First, I want to make it very clear that when I say that women have a proclivity toward connected knowing, I am not saying that women will not or cannot think. I am saying that many
women would rather think with someone than think against someone. I am arguing against an unnecessarily constricted view of thinking as analytic, detached, and divorced from feeling.

Similarly, I do not object to the cultivation of separate knowing in the academy. I believe it is important to teach the skills of separate knowing. But I do object to an educational system that places nearly exclusive emphasis on separate knowing and fails to acknowledge with respect, let alone to nourish, the skills of connected knowing.

When a woman (or anybody) with a proclivity toward connected knowing enters an environment that fails to recognize connected knowing as a legitimate way of knowing, she feels disconfirmed as a thinker. Such women may become highly adept in separate knowing, but, as they say, "it doesn't feel right." It feels lonely, ungenerous, fraudulent, and futile. Thus it never becomes a "me-voice." It remains a separate voice, separate from the self. The me-voice, being ignored, may fail to develop further or may even wither away.

This, to me, is the really insidious effect of an education that emphasizes separate knowing to the virtual exclusion of connected knowing. Like Ruddick (1977), many of the students we interviewed had removed themselves from their work and dissociated thinking and feeling. They had learned, to paraphrase Ruddick, to think only about things they didn't care about and to care only about things they didn't think about.

What is it like for the male undergraduate? In research that Annick Mansfield and I and other colleagues are doing now, exploring separate and connected knowing in men and women, we are finding, so far, that men usually describe themselves as more comfortable and adept in argument than women do. Most of the men interviewed have said that they like to argue and have found argument useful in sharpening their thinking. In a sense, then, educational practices based on an adversarial model may be more appropriate—or at least less stressful—for men than for women.

Typically, the men's responses to our questions about connected knowing reflect an ambivalence similar to the women's attitudes toward argument. These men said they knew they ought to try harder to enter the other person's perspective, but it made them uneasy, and they found it difficult to do, so they didn't do it much. It is possible that men like this might feel as constricted in the kind of connected class discussion I envisage as the women seem to feel in Professor Gorra's classroom. In a connected class, these men might grow silent, and the teacher would worry about what it was in the men's upbringing that had inhibited their intellectual development.

But not all the men would grow silent. Although the preliminary results of our research confirm our hunch that the two modes are probably gender-related, it is clear that they are not gender-exclusive. We are not talking about genetic incapacity here. Many men have said to us, in person or in writing, "Why do you call it 'women's ways of knowing'? I'm a connected knower too."
Many of these men are college professors, and they are feeling as constricted by the exclusively adversarial style of their institutions as the women professors and students are. One man wrote to me:

I took up the study of English literature because I fell in love with the metaphysical poets. But now I find that to get promoted at my institution I must write macho criticism in which I tear my loved ones apart.

Some of these men are considering leaving academic life, divorcing themselves both from their colleges and their disciplines in order, as one expressed it, "to put my heart and mind together again."

That is what Ruddick had to do. Years after earning a Ph.D. and becoming a mother, Ruddick's intellect came alive. In rearing her two children, Ruddick developed a way of knowing that was simultaneously separate and connected. She watched the children closely, attentively, in detail, her attention sharpened rather than clouded by her love for them. As a sort of hobby, she began to study Virginia Woolf, and she found that the way of thinking she developed in reading Woolf was closer to the way of thinking she used in rearing children than to the way she had been taught in college and graduate school. She writes:

I seemed to learn new ways of attending . . . This kind of attending was intimately connected with caring because I cared I reread slowly, then found myself watching more carefully, listening with patience . . . The more I attended, the more deeply I cared. The domination of feeling by thought, which I had worked so hard to achieve, was breaking down. Instead of developing arguments that could bring my feelings to heel, I allowed feeling to inform my most abstract thinking . . . I now care about my thinking and think about what I care about. 

[1984, p. 151]

Ruddick has returned to philosophy, but not to mainstream philosophy, and she has returned to college teaching, but not to traditional college teaching. Reconstructing her professional life around her new ways of knowing, she has invented new forms of philosophy and new styles of teaching. It is this sort of reconstruction that I would like to see all teachers achieve, as men and women, learners and thinkers, and critics and lovers of ideas, so that we can do the work we care about and care about the work we do, and help our students to achieve earlier and with less suffering, the integration of separate and connected knowing.

References


**Footnotes**

¹For a fuller description of these findings, see Clinchy, B., & Zimmerman, C. Epistemology and agency in the development of undergraduate women. In P. Perun (Ed.), *The undergraduate woman: issues in educational equity*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

²All informants' names are pseudonyms.