

# Romance in the Classroom: Inviting Discourse on Gender and Power

by  
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I teach in the Leadership House, a program for mildly learning-disabled special education students in a large comprehensive Philadelphia high school. I work with approximately eighty boys and twenty-two girls, mostly working class African Americans, Euro-Americans and Latinos.

The strong male presence in this program has overwhelmed the girls. Classroom discussions, book selections and even our system of rewards and punishments have favored boys. Boys select the movie of the month — a reward for perfect attendance — and classroom discipline has typically been meted out with a “boys will be boys” attitude. For instance, a girl enters the room to deliver a message, and a boy makes a lewd remark about parts of her body. When I look to the administration in disciplining the boy, I am told “That’s what boys do.” This environment is one that has encouraged sexual harassment and victimization of weaker students. It is one which has sent a clear message that appropriate behavior includes power and domination over others. Misunderstandings between boys and girls have often erupted into violent confrontations, and often girls have faded into the background, overpowered by more aggressive male voices. These gender conflicts have cut across racial and cultural lines. At Leadership House my colleagues and I decided we needed to act to confront this unhealthy situation.

## “Girl Talk” Gives Females a Voice

Three years ago, with the assistance of two volunteers, an African American female attorney and a

Latina engineer, we began “Girl Talk.” These were voluntary sessions which at first took place during the school day twice a month and now are held after school. The purpose of these sessions has been to encourage girls to raise issues of concern to them. And that is what they have done. Girls have revealed their dissatisfaction with a wide range of practices including school curriculum, discipline policy and biased teacher-student interactions. They have said they were tired of reading adventure stories featuring only males in heroic roles, that they were fed up with being called epithets like “bitch” and “whore,” that they disliked having their desires sacrificed for the male “majority.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, as girls began to take part in these “Girl Talk” sessions, the boys complained bitterly over the creation of a program for girls only. They wanted an exclusive time just for boys, who were also anxious for their stories to be heard. We did not set up this boys’ group, but I did devise a way for all students to make themselves heard on the problematic male-female interactions — in school and out — that interfered with our ability to get through the school day comfortably.

## Journal Writing

### Improves Gender Based Interaction

I initiated a ten-minute free write journal time at the beginning of each class period in which students focused on these issues. Some of these entries were perhaps predictable. Boys, for instance, complained

of having to pay for dates, of being called on to lift heavy objects and of being expected to serve as a girl's protector when she stirred up trouble. But as students wrote more, the level of hatred, violence and pain expressed in these journal writings became truly frightening. Girls wrote things like, "David keeps touching me, I want to get up and punch him in the face until he bleeds," and "I hate my body, the boys moo every time I come in the room." The boys made entries like, "These female teachers, I'm going to kill Ms. Smith, if she gets in my face one more time," and "The hookers in this school are nothing but money hungry hos." I myself showed my feelings, writing in my journal, "I hate the way the boys treat me. I know they don't tell Mr. Brown they love him when he gives them a reprimand."

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Our collective anger over what we perceived as harassment by the opposite sex fueled passionate writing for more than two months. There wasn't an idle pen in the class, as it became clear to us that the negative interactions had taken their toll on our ability to function as a community. Over time we came to agree that men and women need to treat each other more respectfully.

**Writing Focuses  
on Male-Female Relationships**

Next, I began to introduce novels, stories and poems that considered themes of romance, love and marriage. We looked at traditional works like *Romeo and Juliet* and de Maupassant's "The Necklace," as well as non-traditional works like Nicholasa Mohr's novella *Herman and Alice*, and Walter Dean Myers *Motown and DiDi*. I found that by making issues surrounding equality, sexism, sexual harassment, abuse, gender and power a conscious part of group discussion, class inquiry and writing, we opened up entirely new interpretations of the traditional works and stimulated inquiry into the non-traditional ones.

When students began to write about this literature, there was a great deal of dissonance between male and female responses. The girls focused on feelings and had idealized views on love, dating and marriage. The boys focused on money, sex and the fleeting nature of romantic attachments in the context of the pulls of everyday life. The following excerpts from student essays and critiques on love and marriage reflect these diverse male-female perspectives. Students were reacting to the following poem by Paul Engle:

TOGETHER  
Because we do  
All things together  
All things improve,  
Even weather.

Our daily meat  
And bread taste better.  
Trees greener,  
Rain is wetter.

Alex, a Euro-American girl:

*The reason why people get married is because they don't want to leave each other's sides. They want to be with each other, have kids and take care of them, and get really close to each other...If I got married I would be so happy. I really would take care of my husband and take him out once in a while. He would take me out too. We would never leave.*

Gabrielle, a Latina:

*Well as for me, I think people get married because they love each other. They are happy with each other and they want to be a part of each other...If I were married I would be happy to be with my husband and we would be together forever. We would love each other for life.*

Howard, an African American, demonstrates a less idealistic view:

*"Bullship" (sic)*  
*Paul Engle is corny because he just knows how he feels. He doesn't know how she feels. She just might feel the opposite. She might just be nice, so she doesn't break his heart. If I said it once, I said it a thousand times, love is nothing but a four letter word to try to score. I think when a girl and a guy like each other,*

*they might do some things together but not all things — and that will come to an end. All good things must come to an end because god darn it, Eve ate the apple!*

(Note: Howard ended all journal entries, essays and diatribes against some particular stance taken by girls or me with “Eve ate the apple.” This view of the original sin as a female responsibility and a sign of feminine psychological weakness was strongly echoed by many of the African American males espousing church fundamentalist views.)

Howard, along with many of the males in the class, did not permit himself to accept the possibility of the kind of love detailed in Engle’s poem. His doubts are underscored by his descent into the macho description of love as being just another word for sexual conquest.

The traditional sex role stereotypes reflected in these journal entries only began to change when students started reading reality-based literature that focused on relations between the sexes. For instance, after a discussion in which students contrasted the relationships in de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” and those in Nicholasa Mohr’s unconventional *Herman and Alice*, a story of a heterosexual woman and a gay man, students began to unpack the reasons for the ongoing conflict between males and females.

James, an African American, wrote:

*When you like women, they think you are supposed to do everything for them. It’s not like we can’t ... it’s like we won’t. Women make men do the dumbest things. It just ain’t right! Can’t we get along? Like and love are two different things. Just because we call you, doesn’t mean we need you. Women want it all ... love, money, cars, money, money, money and more money.*

Marta, a Latina, wrote:

*Some men think that if they give women money, cars and jewelry that women think that means they love you. It’s not that way, because we women see it a totally different way. Well they’re not showing us they care by giving us money and a car, even though they do that. To express love all they have to do is say they love us. The meaning of love is strong affection for each other. That is what love is...*

When Marta read this aloud in class, her view shocked many of the young men who had believed that most women expect money as a sign of affection. As the boys and girls talked, they began to realize they had many similar reactions to the characters’ behavior in these two works. Both boys and girls objected to Mme. Loisel’s failure to support her husband in “The Necklace,” and both agreed that Alice in *Herman and Alice* had valid reasons to leave. When I asked students to think and write about the kinds of issues raised in this literature and in their lives, they and I had a chance to honestly discuss our feelings. Boys and girls began to share ideas and they began to notice they had similar notions on many issues.

### Follow-Up Talk Confronts Gender Issues

Our commitment as a class to asking different questions began to have a positive effect. In one discussion, the girls and I challenged the boys’ use of the phrase “booty calls,” a term popularized on the male-dominated HBO Def Jam Comedy Hour. The term signifies a phone call to a girl for sex and was dramatized in a comedy sketch about Mike Tyson’s call to Desiree Washington. Although Tyson’s guilt was hotly contested by both males and females, the girls were unanimous in their disapproval of a term which disparages all women. The boys grudgingly acknowledged our complaint and vowed to reconsider its use. Even when students went on to another class, they continued to discuss the pain the term evokes for girls. The female teacher in that class was so impressed that she came to me vowing to speak out against sexist remarks not only in the classroom but in the faculty room as well.

But even when we thought we were making progress, deep-seated biases continued to surface as when we read the short story “Spilled Salt” by Beverly Neeley. The story, about the rape of a young woman by a man who offers her a ride home, brought out attitudes we thought we had overcome. The boys made statements like “Dress like a ho, you get what you deserve.” They put forward the stereotypical male view of what constitutes a “good girl” and a “bad girl.”

This stance was an invitation to the girls to become assertive. They stood up for themselves and actively challenged sexism and demeaning stereotypes. They asserted their right to wear anything they wanted without fear of getting groped or raped. They challenged the notion that a single woman without a man



is sexually suspect or someone who is asking for trouble when she goes out alone. One African American male student's blame-the victim question, "Didn't her mother teach her not to get in the car with a stranger?" was decisively countered by a sister: "Didn't his mother teach him it's wrong to rape people?" When I recounted this exchange to a colleague in a gender studies group run by the Philadelphia Writing Project, she pointed out that this comment points to the universal perception that it is the female responsibility to teach moral behavior. I took this back to my classroom and put it on the floor for discussion. Both boys and girls agreed that it is the duty of fathers as well as mothers to provide moral leadership. It was Andrew — the "Eve ate the apple" boy — who had the last comment about the incident presented in the story: "I guess you can't put it all on the woman either."

There is now a growing will and commitment by my entire class to hear the girls' voices. Girls have been empowered by collective strength from their participation in "Girl Talk," and journal writing and classroom conversations have created a space where girls now speak out when they see me favoring boys.

### Conclusion

This has led me to look at my own behavior. I have become much more aware of my tendency to call on boys and to engage them in conversation. In the past, I did this to maintain classroom control by keeping the more vocal boys engaged, but the girls let me know through private conversations, journal writes, and open discussion that this practice was indefensible. Now, I work hard to make room for girls' talk and defend girls' space by constantly reiterating the norms for classroom behavior: Talk one at a time and respect each other. Now I encourage the girls to be more assertive, to give their opinions, and to stand up for themselves. I actively challenge sexism and stereotypes, and I don't hesitate to question the subtle undercutting I get from male students who choose to give me compliments at inappropriate times.

I am committed as a woman teacher to model strategies of resistance to gender, racial and cultural bias by asking students what they think and insisting they reflect on diverse perspectives. We call on a discourse of empowerment sustained by feminist pedagogy:

*Public schools constitute a sphere in which young women could be offered access to a language and experience of empowerment. In such contexts, "well-educated" young women could breathe life into positions of social critique and experience entitlement rather than victimization, autonomy rather than terror. (Fine, 1992, p. 59)*

We are on the road to building healthy classroom relationships which help students become conscious of fairness and equality both in school and out. My students and I work together as a team, and I no longer assume the total burden of maintaining classroom discipline. The students monitor negative interactions, and often just a "be cool, man" from a peer is enough to get back on track. One of the students who most frequently expressed sexist attitudes and made unwelcome physical conduct recently wrote to me, "I don't know if I learned a lot of new information in this class per se, but it is making me look at things in a different way."

What's different is that I have incorporated into classroom discourse issues surrounding gender and power — what has been called by the American Association of University Women the "evaded curriculum." I have done this by using traditional and non-traditional literature, discussion, and written reflection. The effect has been to improve the lives of individual students and the social well-being of the wider school community.

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