Dealing With Dicks: A Study of positionality as young, female lecturers in a male dominated classroom.

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On a recent field trip students were discussing whether a nearby structure could be used to approximate the floors of a proposed hotel. They concluded that the hotel floors would be too short to be useful if they were the height of the levels of the tower. At this point one of the students turned to me smiling and announced loudly “it’s ok Hana, at least you’ll still be able to use it” while patting me on the head. A quick discussion with my male colleagues (with a combined total of over 50 years teaching) confirmed what I suspected; none of them had ever been patted, by a student, like a pet.
-Hana Cadzow, 2013

The research
This research, using an auto-ethnographical approach, draws on the personal experiences of the researchers as young, female, non-technical lecturers in a polytechnic engineering school. It uses existing literature to situate these experiences in relation to gender, power and positionality within the classroom and within engineering faculties more broadly. There is support in the literature for the idea that men and women experience the classroom environment differently (Sinclair, 2010) and this research seeks to add to this through the lenses of our personal experience. The students we come in contact with are almost always male and usually approximately the same age as us. We frequently have to moderate the content of classroom conversation away from sexual themes and offensive, sexist, racist and homophobic language. We have both had classroom materials handed back to us with penises drawn on them, had students make jokes about handing in pornography instead of work or requesting that we navigate away from a work related website to porn sites. Students have stood in front of the class and tried to argue with us and have loomed over our desks demanding they get special consideration for various assessments. These experiences differ significantly from those of other lecturers, even when addressing the same cohort of students. This research suggests that there is a difference in the way our students perceive and construct our positionality in comparison to that of our colleagues. Our gender, age, ethnicity, appearance and lack of industry experience all work to place us in a less authoritative position.

There exists a substantial body of literature documenting the importance of understanding student’s positionality and how it affects their experiences of education and understanding of self, particularly around minority groups in the United States (Hubbard et al., 2013). This research seeks to draw on this literature and extend the ideas of positionality in the classroom to better understand the experiences of diverse educators in their work. By doing so we hope to improve institutional understanding and support for lecturers who may face extra challenges in their day to day work.
Why is it important?

Understanding positionality as part of pedagogy enhances thinking about the complex social environments which operate inside classrooms (Martin and Gunten, 2002). This has two important benefits. Firstly, females make up less than 15% of engineering school faculty both in the United States and across Australasia (Leonard and Nicholls, 2013 and Mills, 2011). While women have the same aspirations as men regarding their academic careers at graduation unequal pay, inflexible hours, fewer professional development opportunities and lower rate of promotion act as barriers to their participation in faculty (Mills, 2011). We would argue that in addition to these factors, the different positionality occupied by young, female lectures generates the need for more self-management and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1940), making it harder for them to perform the same job. Understanding that the experiences of all lecturers are not uniform in nature improves the chances of female faculty gaining appropriate support and training.

Secondly it improves effectiveness in the classroom when educators are aware of how they are positioned in contrast to their students and how their students are positioned in contrast to each other. As female lecturers our positionality is perceived very differently by domestic and international students. When the department took in a large cohort of male students from Saudi Arabia we had to adapt the way in which we interacted with students. Mentoring is incredibly important in STEM environments and an increased awareness of the diversity of experience and position can enhance our capacity to mentor students (Leonard and Nicholls, 2013). Unique lecturer positionality can also be used as a positive teaching tool. For example, by acknowledging the fact that we are not technical experts we are able to gather information from students, enhancing their confidence and participation.
How will the session work?

The focus of this workshop will be to encourage participants to consider their own positionality and to share their thoughts on how it impacts their teaching and their experiences of teaching. We also hope to raise awareness of how we can better support colleagues and students who are positioned in a way that differs from the majority in an education setting.

The workshop will be run in two stages. Each stage will begin with a brief discussion of theory and an introduction of how our experiences speak into or are informed by that theory. We will then provide key guiding questions, inviting participants to discuss these ideas and share their own experiences in small groups. Participants are welcome to springboard off these questions and extend conversation in different directions if they choose. This will be followed by an opportunity for groups to report back to one another on the topic.

Stage one will introduce the researchers and the ideas of positionality and emotional labour, outline some of the factors that we believe are important in understanding how our positionality as lecturers is constructed. The key questions for this stage will include or be similar to;

- Have you considered your positionality before?
- What things make you similar to or different from your students?
- What is your position relative to students? Is this the traditional teacher/student position?
- What do you do day to day to manage your positionality?
- Is it hard or easy? Why?
- What forms of emotional labour do you perform at work?
- Did people in your group have different experiences/ideas? Why?

Stage two will ask participants to evaluate ways in which they can use their own positionality constructively for their students and colleagues.
References:


