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Credibility Gap for Women in Teaching Business Law

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Feminist Law Professors

Nearly all of us root for fairness, not for our own sex. – Nicholas Kristof

Faith Stevelman on the Credibility Gap for Women in Teaching Business Law

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The following was posted by Faith Stevelman (NYLS, Visiting Professor at University of Washington) to the Section on Women in Legal Education's listserv and is reprinted with permission:

Yes indeed, as the enrollment and jobs crises roll along, there will be more and more pressure for faculty to obtain favorable evaluations. Favorable evaluations are all about the match between students' expectations and whatever the reality is in the classroom (ie, not necessarily an objective measure of quality of instruction by any means, we know this, right?). If we find latent expectations in the objective features of the classroom, what does that say about the rest of the classroom experience in terms of gender, stereotypes and failed conformity?

My impression, along with constant media reports about women and glass ceilings in technical fields, is that there is still a credibility gap for some students with women teaching corporate finance, as well as business law subjects, and indeed all other subjects where expectations of power, mastery and hierarchy linger. Consider, as I read in the NYT this weekend (on the subject of the relative paucity of women in senior media positions): **“The closer you get to money and power the more the people talking about the subject are expected to look like the people being covered.”** ... What does that say for women law professors?

You can flip this of course: what does this 'matching' assumption mean for women faculty being 'validated' in our teaching of family law or poverty law or ADR ... ? How to avoid implicitly validating stereotypes of concern for families/children, poor people and reducing contentiousness being marginal/outside's concerns?

Again, I teach business law classes, usually in very large rooms. If I set myself back to the podiums, I will not see or hear my students. I usually move a stool and often a low desk closer to the students. I also use slides and set all that up, along with a remote and microphone, etc. I have to spend fifteen minutes, at least, readying the classroom. As I putter around doing this, to different students I simultaneously look very organized or very disorganized, depending on their frame of reference. Also, I cannot always access my classroom with all the time required to make all the technology and furniture adjustments prior to the exact starting moment of the class – disorganized? Can I tell you how silly I feel dragging a desk or stool into the well of the room? (No one ever offers to help ... fear of looking like teacher's pet?)

Also, I walk around the room to see and hear the students better. I had a senior male colleague tell me that perhaps I lose authority in doing that. What's clear is that perhaps I aggravate the students in doing that, because they cannot be safely away from my seeing their laptops and speaking with them about the day's topics. I go with the option of shaking them out of their comfort zone in the hope that they are stimulated to pay attention and be present, but it doesn't necessarily help me garner favor with students.

So here is the final, extremely painful thing I will share: I recently was asked to watch and critique tapes of my teaching. I had never done this before. Although nothing is more important to me than the quality of my teaching, I was concerned that watching myself on tape would result in my being self-conscious later on, in real time, in the classroom ... So guess what? It was awful and it did.

As I watched myself, I had the twin experience of being both “excessively” female (hair, breasts, hips, feet not in wingtips, ugh!) and insufficiently attractive as a female (bags under my eyes... wow, when did I get ‘old’?). I could not turn off the experience of myself as being vulnerable and disappointing as a WOMAN professor and being vulnerably and disappointing as less than perfectly groomed and fit as a female leader. This is one of the most embarrassing things I have ever felt; I was horrified at myself. Here is the point: If I myself – a committed feminist – cannot really displace this experience of my gender, how can the students be free of this experience? And if they are not free of the gendered view of my teaching, can their evaluations be free of material bias?

We will need to be protective of our hardworking sisters in these perilous times!

-Faith Stevelman

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