Teaching apprehension is used to frame the author’s anxiety about being a young Asian female teacher in a four-year research-oriented university. The chapter explores how demographic characteristics influence teaching styles, the use of language, and self-efficacy beliefs.

Cross-Cultural Teaching Apprehension: A Co-Identity Approach Toward Minority Teachers

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From reading my students’ e-mails and essays I have learned to understand better my identity as a young Asian female instructor at the university level. I insist on my students’ usage of he or she rather than he alone in their writing because males and females should receive equal recognition in today’s society. However, some students may falsely assume that I am attempting to degrade males’ identity. When my students write to me, many of them habitually begin with “Hi, Mrs. Wei.” Because I want to respond politely to my students’ messages I am unwilling to correct them and explain that Wei is my family name rather than my husband’s. Yet my students have no difficulty applying appropriate titles to male teachers. To show their respect to male professors, most college students are comfortable using Dr. before the male teachers’ family names. More specifically, if I present my interest in conducting research, students are surprised that a female college teacher’s duty is not limited to teaching classes. A female instructor is not seen as having the role of researcher and teacher simultaneously; as a result, students have difficulty accepting that image of female faculty.

In terms of students’ perceptions of a nonnative speaker’s teaching, students with little experience with foreign instructors have a difficult time

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accepting foreign teachers’ guidance. As an Asian and nonnative speaker, I have found a few students to have difficulty accepting my sincere critiques, such as when I taught a public speaking course. Some students have either used my foreign-accented speech as an excuse for lowering their learning standards or assumed that I had insufficient knowledge to teach the course due to my ethnicity. In comparison, little conflict takes place when I teach quantitative research methods because this course requires students to use statistical analyses. This phenomenon derives from U.S. students’ stereotype that all Asian teachers are mathematical geniuses who can play with arithmetic easily. Consequently, U.S. students tend to give more recognition to Asian professors’ mathematical developments and as a result are more willing to accept my professional identity when I teach science-oriented subjects than when I teach language-oriented subjects. Although I enjoy teaching quantitative research methods, I pondered the question, Do students respect me in the quantitative class because of my professional identity or because of their stereotype of Asians?

My identity as a teacher is more complicated than that of most females and Asians because I am younger than thirty years old. On first meeting students every semester, I sense their inordinate or indifferent eye contact. These two types of eye contact did not mean anything to me until I accidentally heard some students talking in whispers, saying, “She’s young and skinny.” My intuition told me that students might judge my teaching ability on the basis of my physical appearance. To provide open communication in my classroom, I intentionally made eye contact with all of the students and kindly asked whether they were nervous about taking this class. As I was waiting for them to articulate their concerns, a male student suddenly raised his hand and stated, “You know, you look very young.” The entire class became silent, waiting to hear my response to his statement.

As a woman, in most social occasions I appreciate someone still considering me “young” rather than “old.” But as a college instructor in a classroom setting, I interpret this appraisal differently. The adjective young in this case contains a negative connotation of being inexperienced, and students may use it to challenge a teacher’s knowledge, authority, and limitations. At that moment I hoped to challenge this male student intellectually but not create any negative feelings. To shift my students’ negative attention away from my academic identity and to decrease their anxiety, I said laughingly, “Thank you for your compliment, which shows that I did not waste my makeup.” Even though this response made my students smile, their reactions inspired me to consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of being a young minority female instructor.

My personal experiences may not suggest that all females are underrepresented in the academic profession, but my ethnicity encourages me to reconsider the teaching experience of female faculty members. I therefore begin by reviewing the academic experiences of female minority faculty
members in three areas: (1) gender and teaching, (2) ethnicity and teaching, and (3) age and teaching. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how demographic characteristics relate to teaching styles and language, and how these in turn may reshape our self-efficacy beliefs and decrease our teaching apprehension in academia.

Academic Experiences of Female Minority Faculty

A great number of female instructors receive few positive and satisfied student responses to their teaching (Hamilton, 2002). Many scholars (such as Basow, Phelan, and Capotosto, 2006; Bennett, 1982; Harris, 1975; Sandler, 1991) have discussed their research regarding whether a gender-biased climate exists for female instructors’ teaching, as well as whether below-average student evaluations result from cultural differences between masculine and feminine teaching styles. Studies have shown that male students tend to give female instructors lower ratings in teaching and credibility than they give male instructors (Basow, 1995; Basow and Silberg, 1987; Hargett, 1999). Fewer academic positions and promotions are provided to female faculty in most research and doctoral-granting universities (Ethington, Smart, and Zeltman, 1989; Kuck, Marzabadi, and Nolan, 2004). Furthermore, Liu and Meyer (2005) found that minority teachers, on average, have to deal with more student discipline problems than do Caucasian teachers. Hendrix (1997) pointed out that U.S. students challenge African American teachers’ credibility more commonly than they challenge the credibility of Caucasian teachers. Thus the hidden issue centers around not only whether we as female college teachers experience a chilly climate but also how we as female minority instructors have to establish our credibility in order to interact with students while teaching. De Simone (2001) pointed out that teaching is a process of forming our individual identities, and that we learn who we are through social interactions; consequently, college teachers may evolve differently from one another on the basis of their self-awareness. As teachers, we do not have the power to manipulate which identities are desirable, and students cannot define every meaning for us in classroom communication. To build a supportive learning environment, teachers and students have to work together to establish the preferable norm. We learn to negotiate an acceptable pedagogy as well as our professional identities in different academic settings (Hendrix, Jackson, and Warren, 2003). Given this specific consideration, I now discuss whether there are gender-related differences among teachers.

Gender and Teaching. In regard to whether there are gender-related differences among teachers, the central issue is not whether one gender is more talented than the other relative to a particular teaching position; instead, it is a matter of whether male and female faculty might be more comfortable using one particular teaching style rather than another. Centra and Gaubatz (2000) found that male instructors preferred to use lecture
methods whereas females preferred to use discussions. Regarding course organization, male students rated male instructors as more organized than female teachers whereas female students believed that female instructors were more interactive in their teaching. When Goodwin and Stevens (1993) investigated what ideas construct faculty members’ perceptions of “good” teaching, the results showed that most female professors were more concerned than male professors about students’ cognitive thinking and self-esteem. These studies show then that women are not less talented than men in teaching. If there are differences between how males and females teach, they might be those differences identified in the students’ observations: that females are more interactive and expressive in communication than males, and that males are more direct and organized in presenting messages than females. Thus male instructors may be more likely than female instructors to receive compliments for being effective teachers in the undergraduate and lecture-oriented teaching format. Female instructors, then, in order to be effective, should make adaptations for students not only in teaching styles but also in the use of language.

How we use language shapes our identities in classroom communication, and males and females use language differently to represent their cultures. Kirtley and Weaver (1999) found that women prefer to use a socially oriented style of communication whereas men prefer to use a results-oriented style of communication. As Basow and Rubenfeld (2003, p. 183) have pointed out, “Women are thought to use more expressive, tentative, and polite language than men do.” Based on different identities, men’s talk might demonstrate more authority or be more direct than women’s talk. Although no evidence indicates that the frequent use of expressive, tentative, and polite language influences the leadership abilities of female faculty, I believe that these traits may contribute to male and female instructors’ credibility being evaluated differently. Female instructors might promote a supportive image by using polite language. The use of expressive and polite language helps the instructor build a friendly relationship with students. However, students might misinterpret a female instructor’s politeness as softness. To avoid hurting or offending students, female instructors are more likely to say, “You can improve this. Why don’t you work some more on it?” We may avoid saying, “Your paper is not acceptable and you have to rewrite it.” The term not acceptable demonstrates our authority; however, we are unwilling to display it in most situations (see Tannen, 1994). These observations suggest that female teachers’ comfortableness with using polite language leads us to be easily challenged and misunderstood by students and colleagues. Our problems are not all derived from the use of polite language, however. Ethnicity is another considerable factor.

Ethnicity and Teaching. With respect to ethnicity, Fitch and Morgan (2003) found that college students had negative perceptions of native speakers’ ability to express themselves. These observations not only indicate that
minority teachers are less appreciated by college students than are “native” instructors, but also suggest that there are cultural language barriers between students and teachers in classroom communication.

Language is power, but for international teachers, language is a barrier. My personal teaching experience suggests that there is a difference between formal and informal talk. When native speakers describe their thoughts, they are very comfortable using slang or reductions to explain what they mean. However, most second-language speakers learned to speak English in the most formal and polite ways; therefore we may have difficulty imitating or understanding a native speaker’s informal speaking style. For example, one of my students said, “You rock!” to other students in a classroom discussion. At that moment my mind went blank for about three seconds as I attempted to recall the meaning of that phrase. I had no firm understanding of it because my colleagues never used it in their conversations. Second-language speakers tend to interact formally rather than informally in the workplace; in contrast, college students enjoy using informal talk to ask questions and express their ideas.

**Age and Teaching.** Regardless of gender or cultural differences, aging is an inevitable process for everyone. Smith (2001), a male professor, pointed out his feelings by saying, “While everyone else in the room is the same youthful age my students have always been, I am all-too-visibly getting older” (p. B1). Although I have not yet experienced the disadvantages of being an “old” college teacher, one advantage of being a young teacher is that I am more sensitive to my students’ perspectives and feelings. I gained my first teaching experience as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA). Graduate students working as GTAs may psychologically visualize an integrative coidentity of both teacher and student. This former double identity of teacher and graduate student influences my current sensitivity and patience toward students’ needs even though they may make less adequate comments and raise less intelligent questions than graduate students in class. I can connect to their attitudes and behaviors as if I were a college student. I do not perceive that I have to be a superior; instead, I act as a friend in classroom discussion. Sensenbaugh (1995) noted that building interpersonal relationships involving friendliness, creativity, and accessibility is an important factor in GTAs’ teaching. Sensenbaugh’s study also suggests that when college students connect to their teachers’ perspectives, they may consider their relationship with the teacher to be more supportive of the learning experience.

Although college students may consider a friendly relationship with the instructor, the reason one instructor is rated high is different from the reason another instructor is rated low. For instance, Edwards and Harwood (2003) found that undergraduate students are likely to rate older instructors rather than younger instructors as effective teachers because older instructors are traditionally perceived as wise and competent in the subject and younger instructors are perceived as less experienced and confident in teaching. Considering this difference, the other disadvantage of being a
young instructor is emotional exhaustion. Lackritz (2004) suggests that there is a negative correlation between faculty members’ emotional exhaustion and their age. Younger faculty members tend to have more career pressures than do older faculty members. This result reflects my first year of teaching, which was filled not only with new coursework preparation but also with learning to adjust to the role of being an imperfect teacher. The psychological pressure derived from the question, “Am I good enough in my teaching?” Because of the aspiration to be a good teacher, whatever happened during a class period easily became the focus of my day. During the lunch break I kept thinking about my teaching and my students’ attitudes; I kept asking myself why two students were absent that day and whether they enjoyed my teaching.

In addition to the psychological pressure, students’ comments on evaluations may unintentionally manipulate a young teacher’s classroom policy, interaction, and confidence. In comparison to older faculty, a new teacher is very vulnerable to negative criticism. Young teachers depend on students’ feedback on the evaluations rather than on their own cumulative teaching experiences and confidence to determine their identities.

**Discussion**

Female instructors are not less professional and talented than male instructors; instead, we use different teaching and language styles to negotiate our identities in academia. Because teaching experiences and peer and student evaluations have a sequential influence on an instructor’s self-efficacy, the most important lesson is learning how to refine the self-efficacy of female faculty members. Teacher self-efficacy is defined as an instructor’s belief in his or her ability to perform academia-related tasks (Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, and Medlock, 2004). Schoen and Winocur (1988) found that females have more confidence in teaching than in conducting research. Although women are as professional as men in the academic profession, previous studies (such as Sampson, 1987; Schneider, 1998) have indicated that women do not apply for promotion because they believe they do not have sufficient experience or enough publications. Vasil (1996) found that male professors tend to have stronger self-efficacy beliefs than females with respect to self-promoting strategies. Park (1996) suggested that females might focus more on teaching and service than on research; however, when tenure and promotion are judged by a committee, the committee may not weigh teaching over research.

Furthermore, as Goodwin and Stevens (1993) have pointed out, “female professors seem to place greater value than male professors on seeking ‘outside’ help from peers and others” (p. 181). Whether female professors can gain support from peers as much as male professors can is questionable. The dilemma for females in contrast to males is that in academia a limited number of senior female mentors are available, and most
male mentors avoid mentoring females because they fear getting involved in sexual rumors or they perceive women's attitudes toward the academic profession as less serious than those of men (Luna and Cullen, 1995). Because they receive limited assistance in a highly competitive environment, it is difficult for female faculty members to cultivate a strong self-efficacy, and without receiving senior faculty members' sincere guidance, it is difficult for female faculty members to believe they can survive in academia.

Practical Implications

The goal of this chapter has been to disclose the unheard voice of young minority female instructors. Regardless of our individual identities, facilitating our students' learning is a primary goal of our teaching. As a young Asian female instructor, I suggest the following five pedagogical adjustments for overcoming our fear and apprehension about teaching:

1. We must emphasize an academic age defined by our professional knowledge rather than by our biological age.
2. Asking mentors' opinions is an important method for relieving internal anxiety and building academic rapport.
3. When using student evaluations to measure our teaching effectiveness, we should be sensitive to what students say; however, we should not act on any oversensitive reactions we have to these comments (see Hendrix, 2000).
4. We should not limit our communication styles to those based on a single cultural identity.
5. Although better research may not always produce better teaching (Park, 1996), females should recognize their potential to be good researchers.

First, we may encounter in our students' eyes different evaluations of being young. Although students may have less confidence in younger instructors' teaching than in the teaching of older instructors, we can work positively to accelerate our academic age by receiving external training, gaining a mentor's guidance, and reading about teaching in other sources. Second, emotional burnout rates for young, female instructors tend to be high (Lackritz, 2004). To gain emotional support, we need to have reliable mentors who can understand our difficulties and provide helpful suggestions. Third, because many external factors (such as class size and the personalities of male and female students) can influence rating results, students in a large class tend to give the instructor a poorer evaluation than do students in a small class (Centra and Gaubatz, 2000). A single negative comment is insufficient to represent every student's opinion, and a couple of students with hostility may skew the ratings on the evaluations. We must not trust every comment on the evaluations. Next, the vital issue is not
whether we are males or females, native or nonnative speakers; instead, it is whether we are comfortable and confident in our communication styles in a multicultural classroom. In turn, by using language appropriately, we can produce desirable teaching outcomes and limit our apprehension about teaching. Finally, we aspire to be good researchers, not because we are subordinates in a male-oriented culture or research-oriented institution, but because we are motivated to enrich students’ learning by sharing what we know and have found in our research.

Conclusion

As a young minority female college teacher, I am anxious about predicting my career path as well as about finding my identity in my students’ eyes. Through their eyes I have observed my teaching transition from an inept debut to a more skilled delivery. I do not think that a female scholar needs to sacrifice all feminine characteristics and wear a masculine mask in an academic environment; however, an inexperienced minority female faculty member has to learn to negotiate persistently with students and colleagues about her professional identity, strengths, difficulties, and expectations for the future. The challenge for us is not whether we should devote our time and energy to teaching classes, conducting research, or taking care of family; instead, it is whether we have the courage and fair access to pursue a desirable career in academia.

Notes

1. Students might like to use their instructors as role models in learning.
2. One advantage that older Caucasian teachers have is that they have more power and teaching credibility in academia, and students are less likely to challenge their authority and limitations.
3. The great risk for young instructors of establishing a friendly image in their teaching is losing authority. To balance this approach, young instructors need also to be firm in classroom policies.

References


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