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Jay R. Howard
Butler University, jrhoward@butler.edu

Roberta Baird

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The Consolidation of Responsibility and Students' Definitions of Situation in the Mixed-Age College Classroom

Sociologists have long pointed out that when people enter social situations they bring along with them certain understandings, sometimes called typificatory schemes (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), of the normative behaviors expected of them in the given situation. Participants in an interaction then negotiate roles and role expectations with one another in a process of defining the situation (Goffman, 1959, 1961; McHugh, 1968). Over time habitualized typifications become institutionalized (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The college classroom is one setting where typifications have been institutionalized, because students have clear expectations of their instructors and other students. Unfortunately, their definitions of the classroom and the expected roles of students and professors often do not facilitate learning.

Learning occurs most effectively in a situation where students are actively engaged with the material, other students, and their instructor (see, for example, Astin, 1985; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Kember & Gow, 1994; McKeachie, 1990; Meyers & Jones, 1993). Critical thinking is also fostered by students' active participation in the classroom (see, for example, Smith, 1977; Garside, 1996). Each student brings experiences to the classroom that can contribute to learning through participation in discussion. Therefore, instructors should be concerned with the level and depth of student participation in classroom discussion. However, experience and research demonstrate that most students operate with a "Banking Model of Education," wherein the

Jay R. Howard is associate professor of sociology and assistant dean for budget and planning, and Roberta Baird is a student majoring in psychology and sociology at Indiana University Purdue University Columbus.

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instructor is the bank of knowledge from which the students make withdrawals by taking notes (Freire, 1970).

Previous Research

In 1976 Karp and Yoels identified a college classroom norm they labeled “the consolidation of responsibility.” This norm suggests that in the typical classroom, participation in discussion will be consolidated in the hands of the few, with the majority of students being passive observers or only occasional participants. Howard, Short, and Clark (1996) and Howard and Henney (1998) have found that the “consolidation of responsibility” is still the operative norm for discussion, at least in the mixed-age college classroom.

Studies of participation in classroom discussion have focused on issues of student gender (see, for example, Cornelius, Gray, & Constantinople, 1990; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Fassinger, 1995; Sternglanz & Lyberger-Ficek, 1977), instructor gender (see, for example, Auster & MacRone, 1994; Fassinger, 1995; Pearson & West 1991), class size (see, for example, Constantinople, Cornelius, & Gray, 1988; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Fassinger, 1995; Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996), teaching techniques (for example, Nunn, 1996) and, occasionally, student age (Howard et al., 1996; Howard & Henney, 1998). Relatively little attention has been given to the consolidation of responsibility. While the average male student might participate more frequently than the average female student, and the average nontraditional student more often than the average traditional one, there is, in essence, no “average” participant. Instead, when the consolidation of responsibility is operating, there are only “talkers”—who account for the vast majority of all interactions—and “nontalkers”—those students who speak up only occasionally, if at all (Howard et al., 1996; Howard & Henney, 1998; Karp & Yoels, 1976). Computing mean interaction levels for various demographic groupings is misleading, because it combines the participation of all students—talkers and nontalkers—within a demographic grouping into a single mean score. Instead of asking how often the average member of various demographic groupings (e.g., males versus females) participates, we need to ask who is most likely, and least likely, to accept the consolidation of responsibility and why?

In this study we first identified “talkers” and “nontalkers” via observation. Then we contrasted talkers’ and nontalkers’ definitions of the college classroom via survey and interview to account for their differing levels of participation. How do talkers versus nontalkers view the class-

room? How do their respective definitions of the situation influence their decision to participate or not to participate?

Methodology

Data were collected through a triangulation of research methods: observation, survey, and interview (Denzin, 1989, p. 246). This triangulation of methodologies allowed us to overcome some of the limitations of any single method. For example, in the aforementioned Karp and Yoels (1976) study, the authors discovered via their observations that instructor gender did affect the level of student participation in discussion despite students' denial of this possibility in their survey responses. The goal of this "across method" triangulation is a more fully grounded interpretive research approach (Denzin, 1989).

This case study was conducted during the fall 1997 semester at Indiana University Purdue University Columbus—a satellite campus (approximate enrollment 1,900) of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (approximate enrollment 25,000). Indiana University Purdue University Columbus is a commuter campus which has a large number of nontraditional students (46%), a high percentage of female students (63%), and little racial and ethnic diversity. Because of its relatively "open" admissions policy, Indiana University Purdue University Columbus has a significant number (19%) of students who are officially designated as "underprepared" for college level work. Therefore, findings based on this case study may not be generalizable to dissimilar institutions (e.g., highly selective institutions; residential institutions; institutions with few nontraditional students; racially and ethnically diverse institutions; institutions with very large per course enrollments). Instead, this case study is intended to serve as a starting point for discussions of the nature of student participation in classroom discussion in a variety of campus settings.

Seven students (6 females and 1 male) in an undergraduate research methods course were trained in observation techniques. Each student then chose to observe a course for which they were not currently enrolled. Courses for observation were selected to fit the students' schedules, thus resulting in a nonrandom sample of seven three credit hour courses.¹ The courses were from the following disciplines: Communications, English, history, organizational leadership, psychology (2), and sociology. Four of the observed courses were 100 level, one was 200 level, and two were 300 level. Four of the instructors were female and three were male. Six courses met once per week for 160 minutes

(including a 10-minute break). One course met twice per week in 75-minute sessions. Each course was observed four times during the first month of the semester with the once-per-week classes counting as two observations: one prior to and one after the 10-minute break. Instructor permission to observe was obtained before beginning observations. Instructors were also provided with a short announcement to read to the class informing them of the presence of an observer.

The observers recorded each instance of student verbal participation on a seating chart noting the students' gender and approximate age as either traditional (under age 25) or nontraditional (age 25 or over).² Interactions were coded into three categories: *student-initiated*—the student interrupts the instructor to make a comment or ask a question without invitation to do so; *instructor-initiated*—the student participates in response to a general invitation from the instructor; and *direct question*—the instructor calls upon a specific student to offer a question or comment. In addition to determining the level of participation of various demographic groups in the classroom, the purpose of the observation was to ascertain if the consolidation of responsibility was in effect in these courses and to identify the students who accepted this responsibility, thus becoming “talkers.” Following the model of Karp and Yoels (1976), students who participated twice or more in a class session were considered “talkers.” Students who participated once or not at all in a class session were labeled “nontalkers.”

Once talkers and nontalkers were identified via observation, we conducted interviews with a nonrandom sample of 1 talker and 1 non-talker from each of the seven observed courses. Of the 14 students interviewed, 8 were female, 6 were male, 6 were nontraditional (over age 25), and 8 were traditional. The purpose of the interview was to discover the definition of the classroom employed by students in the course especially as it applied to classroom discussion.

Our final research method employed was a survey of all of the students ($N = 123$) in the seven observed courses. We sought to identify characteristics of students who do and do not participate in class discussion; students' reasons for participating in discussion and reasons for avoiding such participation; and students' perceptions of one another, their instructors, and the classroom environment. We also sought to discover students' perceptions of their own and the instructor's responsibilities in the classroom. In the process of analyzing the data we hoped to paint a picture of the definitions of the classroom held by various groups of students (talkers versus nontalkers, males versus females, traditional versus nontraditional).

Results and Analysis

Our observations resulted in a clear demonstration of the continued operation of the consolidation of responsibility in the college classroom.³ As Table 1 indicates, we made 599 student observations and recorded 1136 instances of student verbal participation with an average of nearly 41 interactions per 75 minute session. The mean total interaction per student in a given session was 1.9. Contrary to some previous research (see, for example, Brooks, 1982; Constantinople et al., 1988; Crawford, & MacLeod, 1990; Fassinger, 1995; Pearson & West, 1991; Sternglanz & Lyberger-Ficek, 1977), a nearly equal percentage of females and males participated in discussion (53.1% to 51.5%), and females participants outpaced their male counterparts in terms of mean interactions per student (2.07 to 1.55). Consistent with previous research (Howard et al., 1996; Howard & Henney, 1998), a much higher percentage of nontraditional students (age 25 or over) participated than traditional students (59.8% to 47.1%). These nontraditional participants

TABLE 1
Interactions per Class Session by Student Gender, Student Age, and Instructor Gender (ANOVA Comparison of Means)

	Mean Interaction Per Session	Mean Attend	Mean No. Students Participate	Percent Students Participate	Mean Interaction Per Student	<i>N</i>
All	40.57	21.39	11.25	52.6	1.90	599
Males (33.0%)	11.16	7.21	3.71	51.5	1.55	202 (33.0%)
Females (67.0%)	29.35	14.18	7.54	53.1	2.07	397 (67.0%)
Traditional (59.7%)	14.60	12.07	5.68	47.1	1.21	338 (59.7%)
Nontraditional (40.3%)	26.00	9.32	5.57	59.8	2.79***	261 (40.3%)
Traditional females	8.00	7.21	3.11	43.1	1.11	202 (33.7%)
Nontraditional females	21.37	6.96	4.43	63.6	3.07	195 (32.6%)
Traditional males	6.56	4.86	2.57	52.9	1.35	136 (22.7%)
Nontraditional males	4.65	2.36	1.14	48.4	1.97	66 (11.0%)
Male instructor	33.46	22.92	10.33	45.1	1.46	275 (45.9%)
Female instructor	45.97	20.25	11.94	58.9	2.27**	324 (54.1%)
<i>N</i>	1136	599			1136	

***Significant at 0.001. **Significant at 0.01.

contributed over twice as many interactions per class session than the traditional students (2.79 to 1.21). Sessions taught by female instructors had higher mean interactions totals per 75 minute session (45.97 to 33.46) and a higher percentage of students participating (58.9% to 46.1%) than those sessions taught by males. Students in female-taught classes also had higher mean total interactions than students in male-taught classes (2.27 to 1.46). Nontraditional females were by far the student demographic group with the highest participation rate (63.6%) and the highest mean number of interactions per session (3.07).

Thus at first glance, it appears that approximately half of the students participate at a rate of almost two interactions per class session each. However, as noted earlier, computing mean levels of interactions can be misleading when the consolidation of responsibility is taken into account. Table 2 reveals that of the 1136 observed interactions, nearly 89% were made by “talkers” (students making two or more interactions in a class session). The typical class session with 21 students in attendance had 6 to 7 talkers making 36 of the 41 interactions (88.7%). The per-

TABLE 2
Interactions by Students Making Two or More (Twoplus) Interactions per Class Session by Student Gender, Student Age, and Instructor Gender

	No. Students Making Two or More Interactions	Percent Students Making Twoplus Interactions	Mean Interactions by Twoplus Students	No. Interactions by Twoplus Students	Percent all Interactions by Twoplus Students	<i>N</i>
All	6.68	31.2	5.39	36.01	88.7	599
Males (33.0%)	2.14	29.7	4.50	9.63	86.3	202 (33.0%)
Females (67.0%)	4.54	32.0	5.81	26.38	89.9	397 (67.0%)
Traditional (59.7%)	2.57	21.3	4.46	11.46	78.5	338 (59.7%)
Nontraditional (40.3%)	4.11	44.1	5.97	24.54	94.4	261 (40.3%)
Traditional females	1.39	19.3	4.51	6.27	78.4	202 (33.7%)
Nontraditional females	3.14	45.1	6.39	20.06	93.9	195 (32.6%)
Traditional males	1.18	24.3	4.39	5.18	79.0	136 (22.7%)
Nontraditional males	.96	40.9	4.63	4.44	95.6	66 (11.0%)
Male instructor	6.50	28.4	4.55	29.58	88.5	275 (45.9%)
Female instructor	6.81	33.6	5.99	40.79	88.8	324 (54.1%)
<i>N</i>	187			1008		

centage of males who were talkers was nearly equal to that of females who were talkers (29.7% to 32%). However, nontraditional students were more than twice as likely to be talkers than traditional students (44.1% to 21.3%). Nontraditional females were the demographic group most likely to accept the consolidation of responsibility and become talkers, with 45.1 percent making two or more comments in a given session. Female-taught courses had a somewhat higher percentage of students who were talkers than male-taught courses (33.6% to 28.4%). Karp and Yoels's (1976) consolidation of responsibility continues to be the defining norm in the mixed-age college classroom.

The importance of student age in relation to level of participation was confirmed by survey results. Through both observation and survey 31% of students were identified as talkers.⁴ As Table 3 shows, talkers' mean age exceeded that of nontalkers by a statistically significant 4.9 years (28.8 to 23.9). All other demographic characteristics of talkers and nontalkers (gender, mean number of credit hours taken, percentage upper-class, percentage in female-taught courses, percentage in male-taught courses, and self-defined GPA) proved to be statistically insignificant.

After identifying the characteristics of talkers and nontalkers, we asked whether the norm of the consolidation of responsibility would continue to exist if we controlled for the source of interaction. Using observational data, Table 4 reveals that the majority of interactions (52.6%) are student initiated—wherein the student interrupts the instructor without invitation to do so in order to make a comment or ask a question. Instructor initiated interactions—the instructor invites stu-

TABLE 3
Survey Characteristics of Talkers and Nontalkers (Kendall's tau—except where indicated)

Characteristic	Nontalkers	Talkers	All
Mean age (Oneway ANOVA)	23.9	28.8**	25.39
Mean credit hour enrollment	10.7	10.2	10.52
Percentage female	67.9	32.1	68.3
Percentage male	71.8	28.3	31.7
Percentage upper-class (junior/senior)	25.9	18.4	23.5
Percentage in female-taught courses	65.7	34.3	100
Percentage in male-taught courses	73.6	26.4	100
Percentage self-defined A student	23.5	28.9	25.2
Percentage self-defined B student	63.5	65.8	64.2
Percentage self-defined C student	12.9	5.3	10.6
<i>N</i>	85	38	123
	(69.1%)	(30.9%)	

**Significant at 0.01.

TABLE 4
Mean Interactions by Source per Student per Session (ANOVA Comparison of Means)

	Total	Student-Initiated	Instructor-Initiated	Direct Question	N	Mean Attend
All	1.90	1.00	0.77	0.13	599	21.4
Male	1.55	0.71	0.71	0.13	202	7.2
Female	2.07	1.15*	0.80	0.12	397	14.2
Traditional	1.21	0.51	0.58	0.12	338	12.1
Nontraditional	2.79***	1.64***	1.02**	0.13	261	9.3
Male instructor	1.46	0.85	0.51	0.00	275	22.9
Female instructor	2.27**	1.12	0.99**	0.15	324	20.3
N	1136	598 (52.6%)	462 (40.7%)	76 (6.7%)		

ANOVA Comparison of Means: ***significant at 0.001. **significant at 0.01. *significant at 0.05.

dents’ comments and questions—accounted for another 41% of all interactions, while direct questions—the instructor calls on a specific student—were only 7% of all interactions. We see that the patterns for gender and age remain much the same with student- initiated and instructor-initiated interactions: females were somewhat more likely than males to participate; nontraditional were much more likely than traditional students to participate; and students in female-taught courses were more likely to participate than their counterparts in male-taught courses. However, as Howard et al. (1996) found, the gaps between the various pairings (males versus females, traditional versus nontraditional) were smaller with instructor-initiated interactions than with student-initiated interactions. Female instructors were significantly more likely to employ instructor initiated interactions than male instructors. Otherwise, there was little difference between groups.

Table 5 provides evidence that the consolidation of responsibility was strong with regard to both student-initiated (86.5% of interactions made by twoplus students) and instructor- initiated (77.9% of interactions made by twoplus students) interactions, but not with direct questions (26.3% of interactions made by twoplus students). This suggests that instructors do not tend to call on the same few students, thus creating the Consolidation of Responsibility; instead, by making participation in discussions entirely voluntary, the same few students volunteer and thus create the Consolidation of Responsibility.

Table 6 allows us a look at these talkers by demographic groupings. We find that while females are slightly more likely to be talkers (32.0% to 29.7%), the difference was not statistically significant. However, non-

TABLE 5
Interactions by Students Making Two or More Interactions by Source

Source	Number of Interactions	Number Students Making Two or More Interactions	Percent of Students Making Twoplus Interactions	Number Interactions Made by Twoplus Students	Mean Interactions by Twoplus Students	Percent all Interactions Made by Twoplus Students
All	1136	187	31.2	1008	5.39	88.7
Student-initiated	598	103	18.2	517	5.02	86.5
Instructor-initiated	462	86	14.4	360	4.19	77.9
Direct Questions	76	5	0.8	20	4.00	26.3

Student $N = 599$

TABLE 6
Percent of Students Making Two or More Interactions by Interaction Source (Kendall's tau)

	Total Interactions	Student-Initiated Interactions	Instructor-Initiated Interactions	Direct Questions	N
All Students	31.2	18.2	14.4	0.08	599
Males	29.7	16.3	13.9	1.5	202
Females	32.0	19.1	14.6	0.5	395
Traditional	21.3	8.6	10.9	0.3	338
Nontraditional	44.1***	30.7***	18.8**	1.5	261
Female instructor	33.6	18.2	18.8	0.6	275
Male instructor	28.4	18.2	9.1***	1.1	324
N	1136	598	462	76	599

Significant at 0.01. *Significant at 0.001.

traditional students are much more likely than traditional students to be talkers (44.1% to 21.3%), and the difference was statistically significant. Nontraditional students were significantly more likely than traditional students to make both two or more student-initiated (30.7% to 8.6%) and instructor-initiated (18.8% to 10.9%) interactions. We also found a statistically significant greater percentage of talkers in response to instructor-initiated interactions in female-taught courses as compared to male-taught courses (18.8% to 9.1%). The most significant demographic variables in determining the number of students who will become talkers—accepting the consolidation of responsibility—are student age and, at least in the case of instructor-initiated interactions, instructor gender.

After identifying talkers and nontalkers via observation, we attempted to account for the differing levels of participation by comparing definitions of the college classroom through interview and survey. We discovered that nontalkers, more so than talkers, tended (1) to see their role in the classroom as a largely passive one; (2) to view the classroom as a potentially threatening environment; and (3) to view the instructor as the sole source of authoritative knowledge. Both groups of students (4) tended to view talkers as generally helpful, but possibly becoming annoying by taking too much time away from the “expert” instructor; (5) primarily viewed nontalkers as either shy or uninterested; and (6) viewed students as “customers,” thus placing limitations on what they thought instructors should do to force students to participate in discussion.

Passivity in the Classroom

Survey results indicated that nontalkers saw their role in the classroom as a much more passive one than did talkers. As Table 7 shows, at least 96% of both nontalkers and talkers agreed that students should complete assigned tasks, attend class, study and learn. However, only 50.6% of nontalkers surveyed (compared to 94.7% of talkers) indicated that they thought students had a responsibility to participate in discussion. Nontalkers were also significantly less likely than talkers to indicate that they had a responsibility to pay attention in class (95.3 to 100%) and to ask for help from the instructor when they needed it (92.9 to 100%).

As Table 8 shows, when we asked students to identify their reasons for participation (via survey) in the class discussion, we discovered that talkers were significantly more likely to say that they had “something to

TABLE 7
Students' Perceived Responsibilities by Level of Participation (Kendall's tau)

My responsibilities as a student include : (Circle all that apply)	Nontalker	Talker	All
complete assigned tasks	97.6	100	98.4
attend class	96.5	100	97.6
study for exams/quizzes	96.5	100	97.6
learn the material	96.5	100	97.6
pay attention in class	95.3	100*	96.7
ask for help from the instructor when I need it	92.9	100*	95.1
participate in class discussion	50.6	94.7***	64.2
Other (Please specify):	1.2	7.9	3.3
N	85	38	123

*significant at 0.05. ***significant at 0.001.

TABLE 8

Reasons for Participation in Discussion by Level of Participation (Kendall's tau)

In this class, I participate in discussion because: (Circle all that apply)	Nontalker	Talker	All
I have something to share	61.2	84.2**	68.3
I need clarification	52.9	65.8	56.9
I learn more when I participate	32.9	78.9***	47.2
the instructor calls on me	29.4	21.1	26.8
participation may help my grade	25.9	28.9	26.8
I disagree with something the instructor said	18.8	34.2	23.6
I like to talk	14.1	31.6*	19.5
if I don't, no one else will	9.4	34.2**	17.1
I don't participate in discussion	15.3	0.0***	10.6
I am trying to help other students	7.1	15.8	9.8
Other (Please specify):	5.9	2.6	4.9
<i>N</i>	85	38	123

*significant at 0.05. **significant at 0.01. ***significant at 0.001.

share”; that they “learn more when they participate”; that they “like to talk”; and that they participate because “no one else will.” Each of these findings were reflected in interview comments indicating that talkers think participation is a part of what is required of students, whereas nontalkers see such participation as optional rather than required in the college classroom.

The nontalkers, when interviewed, tended to describe their responsibilities as a student and their definitions of class participation in largely passive terms.

I basically just listen. . . . I just usually try and take in all other opinions and facts and try to learn it all. I'm pretty passive. *Traditional male non-talker*

I would much rather hear the instructor speak than me. I will only ask a question if I need clarification. *Traditional female non-talker*

I never have anything to say. *Traditional female non-talker*

[My responsibilities as a student include,] I guess, just to be there. . . . *Traditional male non-talker*

[In response to the question, what are your responsibilities as a student in the classroom?] You mean other than showing up? *Traditional female non-talker*

Clearly, the nontalkers interviewed defined their role in the classroom as a passive one. Some thought they had fulfilled their obligations as students with their mere presence. The instructor was the only one who was required to be actively involved in the classroom. As one might expect, talkers, on the other hand, saw the classroom as an environment requir-

ing a more active approach, thinking it necessary to participate in discussion in order to facilitate their learning and fulfill their responsibilities as students.

Just because you are there does not mean you are participating. If you have something to say, you need to say it. *Traditional male talker*

I think you learn more by being prepared and talking or asking questions about the subject. Even if you are prepared and don't say anything, I don't think you learn as much. *Traditional male talker*

Be active. Get the points clarified, if they're not [clear]. *Nontraditional male talker*

The talkers interviewed also showed sensitivity to the feelings of the instructor and pedagogical needs of the class more generally. They were willing to accept responsibility, as students, to actively facilitate their own learning and that of their classmates.

I also don't like a long span of somebody not talking. It makes me uncomfortable if nobody answers. Then I'll answer. *Nontraditional female talker*

If I am in a room where nobody talks, I'll be generally the one who starts talking or whatever. . . . I think that discourages the teacher, I mean if she's asking questions and nobody participates, that kind of discourages. It would be like, "Why am I doing this? Nobody's listening." *Traditional male talker*
[Student responsibilities are] . . . to answer questions and to help the class know what you know. *Nontraditional female talker*

A lot of times, people will have questions about things and not everybody will bring up the questions even if they have a question. Usually, if you have people who participate frequently and the teacher is not expressing something very clearly, the people who participate will speak up and kind of speak for the class and express that they don't understand. *Traditional male talker*

Thus the talkers we interviewed willingly accepted the consolidation of responsibility for participation in discussion and, at least on occasion, consciously recognized themselves doing so.

The Classroom as a Potentially Threatening Environment

Nontalkers showed a greater degree of concern with how they are received by their peers and their instructors, suggesting that they perceive the classroom as a potentially hostile, threatening environment. As revealed in Table 9, when we asked students why they choose not to participate in discussion, we found that nontalkers were significantly more likely than talkers to cite "the chance that I would appear unintelligent to other students"; "the chance I would appear unintelligent to the instructor"; "the class is too large"; and "I am shy." Each of these reasons ex-

TABLE 9

Reasons Why Students Choose Not to Participate by Level of Participation (Kendall's tau)

In this class, when I choose NOT to participate in discussion I do so because: (Circle all that apply)	Nontalker	Talker	All
of the feeling that I don't know enough	50.6	44.7	48.8
of the chance I would appear unintelligent to other students	47.1	13.2***	36.6
my ideas are not well enough formulated	34.1	36.8	35.0
I have nothing to contribute	31.8	37.2	35.0
I have not completed the assigned tasks (I am not prepared)	30.6	39.5	33.3
I am shy	43.5	7.9***	32.5
of the chance I would appear unintelligent to the instructor	37.6	15.8**	30.9
someone else will participate therefore I don't need to.	27.1	5.3***	20.3
the class is too large	23.5	2.6***	17.1
I always participate	5.9	31.6**	13.8
the course is not interesting to me	12.9	31.3	13.0
Other (Please specify):	4.7	15.8	8.1
the instructor does not want participation or discussion	7.1	7.9	7.3
<i>N</i>	85	38	123

significant at 0.01. *significant at 0.001.

presses an underlying lack of confidence on the part of nontalkers, and they also indicate that nontalkers do not feel secure enough in their classroom environment to take the risk of participation in discussion.

Interview comments revealed that it was important to nontalkers that others show respect and courtesy to them.

I'm just not comfortable talking in front of a large group of people. I guess 'cause maybe I will say something more stupid or something that is wrong, you know. . . . Most of the time I think that I'm right, but I don't say it because of fear that I will be wrong. I guess, you know, I'm kind of embarrassed. *Traditional female non-talker*

Other responsibilities that students have are to respect the opinions of others. *Traditional female non-talker*

Instructor as Sole Source of Knowledge

Not surprisingly, talkers and nontalkers alike viewed instructors as authorities who brought expert knowledge to the classroom. It was the instructor's accumulated wisdom that was to be the focus of the class session. As Table 10 indicates, talkers and nontalkers agreed that instructors had a responsibility to (a) be knowledgeable of the subject matter, (b) make the class interesting, and (c) follow the syllabus. Talkers were significantly more likely than nontalkers to perceive that the instructor had a responsibility to help students think critically—which requires a greater degree of involvement on the part of students. However,

TABLE 10
Perceived Instructor Responsibility by Level of Participation (Kendall's tau)

The instructor's responsibilities to me as a student include: (Circle all that apply)	Nontalkers	Talkers	All
be knowledgeable of the subject matter	96.5	100	97.6
make the class interesting	91.8	92.1	91.9
help me think critically about the material	71.8	86.8*	76.4
follow the syllabus	70.6	72.2	71.5
motivate me to participate in discussion	45.9	60.5	50.4
know me by name	41.2	47.4	43.1
call on me to participate in discussion	12.9	23.7	16.3
Other (Please specify):	14.1	18.4	15.4
<i>N</i>	85	38	123

*significant at 0.05.

what stands out on Table 10 is that students, talkers and nontalkers alike, did not perceive that instructors were responsible for motivating their active participation in the course. Only half of those surveyed thought the instructor was responsible to motivate them to participate in discussion, only 43% felt the instructor should know them by name, and only 16% thought the instructor was responsible to call on them to participate in discussion.

Another significant difference between talkers and nontalkers was their perception of opportunities for participation in the classroom. As Table 11 reveals, talkers were significantly more likely than nontalkers to agree that instructors paused long enough (94.7% to 80.0%) and frequently enough (92.1% to 78.8%) to allow them to ask questions. The underlying message of both the survey and interview data was that the instructor must be active and interesting, whereas students were free to choose to be passive observers.

Operating with a bank of knowledge model, students thought that instructors were the bank of wisdom from which they made withdrawals by taking notes (Freire, 1970).

The instructor is there to teach you what you need to know. *Traditional female non-talker*

They need to be knowledgeable of the subject, and they pretty much need to be an expert in the area that they're teaching. *Nontraditional female talker*

[The instructor is responsible]. . . to get the information out. *Nontraditional male talker*

When we asked students what they thought were the responsibilities of the instructor, they expressed concern that the expert knowledge be provided in a format that was easily understandable.

TABLE 11

Perceptions of Classroom Environment, Instructor Behaviors, and Other Students by Level of Participation (Kendall's tau)

Percentage Who Strongly Agree or Agree with following statements	Nontalkers	Talkers	All
This instructor pauses long enough to allow me to ask questions or make comments.	80.0	94.7***	84.6
This instructor pauses frequently enough to allow me to ask questions or make comments.	78.8	92.1***	82.9
In this class, students who frequently participate in discussion are helpful to me.	60.0	92.1***	69.9
I sometimes find myself getting annoyed with students who talk too much.	65.1	42.1**	57.8
It is fair for an instructor to make verbal participation a part of my grade.	29.4	73.7***	43.1
I sometimes find myself getting annoyed with students who do not participate in class discussion.	6.0	15.8***	9.0
<i>N</i>	85	38	123

***significant at 0.001. **significant at 0.01.

To get his points across clearly. To make sure everyone understands it, [be]cause I'm not very high on the professor that talks above you, I like everybody to understand it. I like somebody to talk with you instead of down at you. *Traditional male non-talker*

To explain things in a fashion that the students will understand. *Traditional male talker*

The responsibility to provide expertise and communicate it clearly was placed on instructors, whereas students were responsible for the relatively passive act of recording it in their notes. However, talkers did tend to see a place for their own contributions to that knowledge, whereas nontalkers did not.

[Instructors] also need to listen to the students. Sometimes the students may know something the instructor doesn't know. *Traditional male talker*

I like to add what I think or know of the subject. Some of these topics I deal with at work so I like to get involved. *Traditional male talker*

I think that when you voice an opinion you give an overview, a better perspective, a wider, broader view of an issue. Or you may bring up some issues that haven't been talked about, or you may point out some issues that are significant to the issue that is being discussed. *Nontraditional male talker*

I feel wisdom in age, in what I've done. I may help someone else out there to experience a part of what the lesson is for the day. *Nontraditional male talker*

[Other students] asking questions, a lot of times, it brings out questions you didn't think to ask. It helps you learn. *Nontraditional female talker*

Perceptions of Talkers

In general, talkers and nontalkers alike found their talkative classmates to contribute to learning, particularly by seeking clarification from the instructor when students were confused. However, nontalkers frequently were concerned that talkative classmates who sought to inject their own experiences and insights into the discussion took too much time away from the “true expert” in the classroom—the instructor.

We found that nontalkers were significantly more likely to become annoyed with classmates “who talk too much” than were talkers (65.1% to 42.1%) (see Table 11). These survey responses were affirmed in interview comments about classmates’ perceptions of talkers.

Students who continually speak take away time from the instructor. I want to be assured that I am getting all of the information that I can while I am in class. *Traditional female non-talker*

When they just want to throw in what they have to say. They’ve experienced the same thing a week ago or whatever. That’s not what we are in there for. *Traditional female non-talker*

To be a talker, then, involved some risk. Classmates will likely appreciate the talker’s willingness to ask the instructor for clarification of confusing subject matter, but to offer one’s own insights or experiences as relevant knowledge may mean being perceived as wasting valuable class time—time that some classmates perceive should be spent listening to the expert instructor’s comments instead.

Perceptions of Nontalkers

For the students who choose to be nontalkers, the risks involved in participation outweighed those involved in nonparticipation. As long as one was not disruptive or disrespectful, most classmates were likely to assume you were merely shy rather than failing to fulfill your responsibilities in the classroom. However, as Table 11 shows, the talkers we surveyed were significantly more likely to become annoyed with “students who do not participate in class discussion” than were other nontalkers (6.0% to 15.8%). But clearly, the greater risk, as measured by the percentage of students overall who were likely to become annoyed, was associated with being a talker (57.8% to 9.0%).

To be a non-talker had a different type of risk in terms of the perceptions of your classmates. Nontalkers were perceived as being of two types. First, there are students who remain silent because they are shy. Second, there are students who are silent because of a lack of interest or motivation. Often, students thought, it was difficult to tell the two

apart—barring some type of body language or disruptive behavior that would provide a clue.

I think there are two types of students who don't participate. Some are just shy naturally and have trouble in any size group. And I think the other type is the group who doesn't prepare their lessons and so therefore, they can't participate. *Nontraditional female talker*

There are those, that because of their upbringing, are not very vocal. They're introverted individuals. They may be gleaning a lot of information from what is going on and just not reflecting it by speaking up. There are others . . . who really don't participate and will sit back. They are getting less out of the course because they are more interested in passing that side note or talking that side thing in the class. I find that their attention span is really small compared to what should be going on. *Nontraditional male talker*

Students as Customers

Although many students, talkers especially, agreed that participation would facilitate learning, they were ambivalent about instructors who would require or grade participation in discussion. Thus, as we saw in Table 10, only half of the students surveyed indicated that the instructor had a responsibility to motivate discussion. Table 11 revealed that only 43% of all students and only 29.4% of nontalkers thought it was fair for an instructor to make verbal participation a part of their grade. The underlying definition of the situation was that the seller should always make things as comfortable as possible for the buyer. The instructor is paid to be active. Students, as consumers, have purchased the right to choose a passive role if they wish. To make them uncomfortable by requiring they participate in discussion was deemed an unreasonable expectation by many of the students interviewed.

To our surprise, much of their hesitation was rooted in a view of "students as customers." In constructing our interview guides, we had not planned on asking questions specifically designed to acquire student views on the student-as-customer analogy. Nonetheless, the analogy kept coming up, both directly and indirectly, in interview responses. In the student-as-customer perspective described by interviewees, the seller should not make the customer feel uncomfortable. Thus, as applied in the classroom, the student has purchased the right to a comfortable environment and the right to choose their degree of involvement or noninvolvement.

[Students are] paying for it, so if they want to [participate in discussion] they should, and if they don't want to, they shouldn't have to. *Traditional female non-talker*

I don't think you should force anything to the students. Even though you will

be using it later in your careers. . . . If they don't want to, I think that is their decision. *Traditional male non-talker*

It is not fair to force someone to verbally participate if they do not feel comfortable doing so. *Traditional female non-talker*

If a person pays their money, they should be able to determine whether or not they talk. It's their money. *Nontraditional female talker*

For the price we pay for tuition, I expect a true expert. . . . I would much rather hear the instructor speak than me. *Traditional female non-talker*

I think that it should be up to them [the students] if they want to speak or not. The instructor is the one paid to show up and talk to the class. Not the other way around. *Traditional female talker*

In sum, although students are willing to recognize the contributions of student participation to learning, seeing themselves as educational consumers, they are often hesitant to define it as something that can be reasonably required of them.

Conclusion

The consolidation of responsibility continues to be the defining norm for participation in discussion in the mixed-age college classroom. It is the nontraditional students who most readily accept the responsibility for discussion, whereas their younger classmates choose to adopt a much more passive role in the classroom. Nontalkers and talkers are operating from differing definitions of student and instructor responsibilities in the classroom.

Nontalkers see their more passive role as justifiable because they view themselves as consumers of education. As consumers, they think they have purchased the right of nonparticipation. Therefore, instructors should not make them uncomfortable by requiring that they participate. Nontalkers make this assumption in spite of their recognition of how participation can lead to increased learning and better preparation for careers. The instructor is the paid expert, and it is his or her responsibility to deliver knowledge in an easily understandable form.

Talkers largely share this student-as-consumer assumption, thinking that if students don't want to participate they should not be forced to do so. Nonetheless, talkers choose to participate because they think it facilitates their learning and that they, in addition to the instructor, have knowledge to contribute to the class.

McMillan and Cheney (1996), though acknowledging the positive aspects of accountability and responsiveness that the student-as-consumer metaphor highlights, point out that the metaphor also obscures or dismisses several vital aspects of the educational process. At least three of

these obscured aspects were explicit or implicit in the comments of the students interviewed in this study. First, McMillan and Cheney (1996) suggest that the student-as-consumer metaphor suggests undue distance between the student and the educational process. Students become purchasers of education rather than cocreators within the educational experience—something clearly demonstrated in survey responses and interview comments in this study. Second, the metaphor makes professors vendors and entertainers “hawking their wares” in the effort to keep the “always-right-consumer” happy. We no longer ask, Did students learn? Instead, the metaphor suggests the question, Are student-customers pleased? Though this may be an appropriate question in the bursar’s or the registrar’s office, it may lead to less learning should it be taken too far in the professor’s office. Thirdly, the metaphor reduces the educational experience to a product to be purchased rather than a process that requires students’ active participation. Again, as the students interviewed in this study confirmed, “Student ‘consumers’ expect an exchange between the teacher and student which is increasingly monologic and unidirectional: in fact they may demand it” (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 9). When students hold such definitions, instructors are placed in an especially difficult situation. To challenge them may generate student resistance and possibly lower scores on course evaluations, evaluations that may be waived in front of instructors as administrators insist that “students are our customers.” Yet, to accept students’ passive definitions of their role in the classroom may well mean that less learning will occur.

The student-as-consumer model raises issues beyond participation in class discussion. If it is unfair to make students uncomfortable in the classroom, is requiring that they read challenging material unfair? Is it unfair to give a rigorous exam? Is it unfair to require a paper that necessitates research—something more than a student’s unsubstantiated opinion? Is it fair to require students to conduct potentially uncomfortable self-assessments in their writing? All of these requirements, when used properly, can facilitate greater learning. Yet each also, potentially, makes student consumers uncomfortable. Ought instructors to cease making such expectations a part of their courses because students don’t want to be made to feel uncomfortable? Colleges and universities need to carefully consider their use of the student-as-consumer analogy. Administrators may properly use the analogy to promote quality teaching and administrative services. However, students may carry the analogy into the classroom and make assumptions that promote their passivity and, hence, less learning.

The “student-as-consumer” analogy needs to be balanced with the

“student’s parents-as-consumers,” the “student’s future employer-as-consumer,” and the “student’s nation or society-as-consumer” analogies. When we place our responsibilities as educators to students in light of our responsibilities to parents, employers, and broader society, the desire to “please” students takes a secondary role to the desire to ensure that students learn. If students are educational consumers, then they are entering into an economic transaction similar to when they hire a physical fitness trainer. The trainer’s job, as well as the educator’s job, is to push students to achieve more than they thought possible. That will involve some pain and considerable effort on the consumer’s part. Merely seeking to keep the consumer content and avoiding all discomfort without ever causing them to develop greater ability is to do the consumer a serious disservice. Administrators need to use care when employing the “student-as-consumer” analogy. Clearly, it is appropriate in certain aspects of higher education. However, employing the analogy in the classroom can cause students to adopt definitions of their own roles that are detrimental to learning.

We must recognize our own culpability in facilitating students’ adoption of these definitions. Research has demonstrated that active participation in the classroom facilitates learning. Yet, if instructors view participation in discussion as something that is optional, a byproduct of lectures that only happens spontaneously, we encourage and reinforce students’ passivity. If we rely on students to initiate discussion rather than structuring it into courses and assessment of student learning, then it is quite reasonable that students should see their participation as optional. There is an abundance of pedagogical literature (see McKeachie, 1990 for an overview) extolling the value of active learning and offering techniques that can be adopted. Instructors need to take advantage of this literature and begin redefining our classrooms for our students and ourselves. Administrators need to reward instructors who take this responsibility seriously.

Further research is warranted to address both the issue of the consolidation of responsibility in the college classroom and the impact of the student-as-consumer analogy. Research needs to be conducted at a diverse array of institutions before we can fully understand and seek to improve higher education for talkers and nontalkers alike by the application of sociological knowledge in our own backyards.

Notes

¹Despite being nonrandom, the resulting sample closely approximated the overall student enrollment. Nontraditional students made up 46% of total enrollment and 40.3%

of the sample. While 67% of the sample of observed students was female, 63% of the overall enrollment was female.

²Observers' categorization by age closely approximated the survey findings. According to observational data, 40.3% of students were nontraditional (age 25 or older), while according to the survey 36.4% were nontraditional students. The discrepancy could be due to changes in attendance from the first few weeks of the semester, when observations were made, to the second half of the semester, when the surveys were conducted.

³Both the observational data and the survey data suggest that our nonrandom sample approximates the campus as a whole. In regard to student gender, the percentage of female students was relatively consistent (67% of students observed; 68% of students surveyed; and 63% of campus enrollment). Student age was similarly consistent in terms of the percentage of students who were "nontraditional"—age 25 or over (40% of students observed; 36% of students surveyed; and 46% of campus enrollment).

⁴Based on our observation of student participation levels in classroom discussion, we concluded that many students overestimated their participation in survey responses. Thus, in analyzing the survey data we defined "talkers" as students who perceived they made three or more contributions to class discussion in a typical class session. This resulted in 30.9% of students being defined as "talkers"—a percentage that accurately reflects our observations of students making two or more comments per session (31.2%). If we defined "talkers" as those who perceived that they made two or more contributions, an inflated 53.7 percent of all students would qualify as "talkers."

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