The Use of Linguistic Space by Boys and Girls in Secondary Small-group-Discussions: Whose Talk Dominates?

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The Use of Linguistic Space by Boys and Girls in Secondary Small-group-Discussions: Whose Talk Dominates?

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This paper discusses gender-based differences in the ways that students in the Middle Years of secondary school use linguistic space in teacher facilitated small-group discussions. Preliminary analyses of the video-taped discussions, and more detailed analysis of interviews with boys and girls reveal boys’ domination of the linguistic space. However, teachers and students have very different perspectives on the way that gender construction impacts on the ways in which students engage in the discussion process.

Introduction

This paper, which is a work in progress, examines differences in ways that boys and girls in the Middle Years of secondary schooling engage in the discussion process. The focus on small-group work is grounded in a belief that students need opportunities to work in small-groups facilitated by a teacher to hone their discussion skills (Abbott & Godinho 2001; Godinho 2001, Clements & Godinho, 2003) and to develop a foundation for ongoing dialogue (Ritchhart 2002). This is consistent with the social constructivist approach to learning, which supports the notion of teachers and students working collaboratively to construct meaning jointly through sharing viewpoints and listening actively (Westgate & Corden 1993; Wegerif & Mercer 1996).

This study extends research I undertook for an Early Career Researcher grant awarded by the University of Melbourne in 2002, examining gender-based differences in the use of linguistic space in small-group literature discussions in primary classrooms. Feedback from secondary teachers when the findings were presented at conferences and seminars suggested the need to extend the study into the Middle Years of secondary schools (Year 7-9). Anecdotal evidence provided by secondary teachers indicated that while boys might

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dominate the linguistic space at school primary levels (Godinho & Shrimpton 2002; 2003), this was not the case in secondary settings. They attest it is the girls who more frequently initiate talk and maintain the dialogue or the conversational flow in whole class and small-group discussions.

My research is driven by a widely held concern for boys’ underachievement in literacy. National literacy benchmarks have shown a flattening out of literacy achievement levels for students from years 4-9, but particularly for boys (Cresswell et al. 2002). Moreover, boys’ achievement levels in writing and in spoken language compared with girls are even more evidenced in these two literacy strands. In this study, data from videotapes of discussions across English, the Arts and Studies of Society and the Environment (SoSE) and interviews with teachers and students will be used to explore the premise that boys are less inclined than girls to use verbal reasoning skills and to actively explore their thinking through talk. Given the importance of talk for learning across all learning disciplines with regard to developing ideas and concepts, a close examination of boys’ engagement in the discussion process and of their enacted communication strategies has particular significance.

**Situating the study within research findings and the literature**

Research on gender and education for many years has focussed on being inclusive of girls and highlighting how issues relating to their learning needs were being overlooked. However, more recently the pendulum has now swung to what Weaver-Hightower (2003, p. 471) refers to in the Unites States as ‘the “boy turn” in research on gender and education.’ In Australia, there has likewise been a wealth of literature related to the theme: ‘What about the boys?’ (Alloway & Gilbert 1997; Biddulph 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Connell 2000; Martino & Berrill 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003; Rodgers 2001). Boys’ education has also been the subject of key government reports (Alloway et al. 2002; Commonwealth of Australia 2001; 2002; 2003; Department of Education, Science and Training 2002), which have resulted in Commonwealth funded national projects such as the Boys Lighthouse, Stages 1 & 2. While it is undeniable that in

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the wider world women are still disadvantaged professionally, economically, politically and socially, boys are not performing as well as the girls as the aforementioned government reports attests as does Australian Council for Educational Research paper (Cresswell et al. 2002).

It is essential, however, that progress in literacy not be generalized in terms of gender-based achievement (Alloway & Gilbert 1997; Rowan et al. 2002). Social and cultural capital must always be taken into consideration as gender patterns of student participation and performance are aggravated or moderated by socio-economic status (Teese et. al 1995). Therefore, for this study, a diverse range of school of school settings was chosen to ensure students were representative of different social, cultural and economic backgrounds. The notion of focussing on ‘which girls, which boys?’ (Rowan et al. 2002; Collins et al. 2000) is a critical consideration for any gender-based research. In my earlier study of primary classrooms (Godinho & Shrimpton 2003) an additional question emerged: ‘which teachers?’ Teachers who were aware of what a discussion involves, and how gender can impact on the discussion process were able to ensure productive and more equitable use of the linguistic space by both boys and girls.

Research on gender-based differences in student talk is limited, with studies more focussed on aspects of quality discussion (Dillon 1990; 1994; Bridges 1988; Edwards & Westgate 1994; Godinho 2001). Of particular interest to this study is Baxter’s finding that identifies the ‘affiliative, cooperative “style” associated with girls in classroom talk as opposed to the competitive, adversarial “style” associated with boys’ (1999, p. 87). Other studies affirm that girls are considered better at collaborative small-group talk where interpersonal skills are valued (Jenkins & Cheshire 1990; Reay 1991; Sadker & Sadker (1994). According to Jenkins and Cheshire, girls are ‘careful listeners and cooperative members of their discussion groups’ (1990, p. 261). In a later study, Baxter (2002) noted boys’ failure to endorse ideas introduced or developed by girls, affirming observations by Jenkins and Chesire and Swann and Graddol (1995), and suggesting that female subservience assisted in reproducing male-female power relationships. Girls in Baxter’s...

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study conformed to expectations of classroom discourse whereas boys flaunted ‘the rules’ to seize the floor.

Such findings support Spender’s research in the 1980s that found that by school age children ‘bring to the classroom the [gendered] understanding that it is males who should have the floor and females who should be the dutiful listeners’ (1980, p. 149). Moreover, research in the 1980s claimed that teachers were unaware that girls occupied less linguistic space in discussions (Spender 1982; French & French 1984; Sadker & Sadker 1985). Surprisingly, studies by Swann & Graddol (1988) found that boys, girls and teachers frequently colluded to allow boys’ dominance of the linguistic space.

With regard to ‘the boy turn’ view of research on gender and education, Yates (2000) best sums the situation by stating that feminist literature has allowed girls to be treated with sensitive detail but has left the boys as ‘a more shadowy other’. It is this very shadowy other that this study will attempt to flesh out so that boys’ engagement can be more expressively articulated. This brief overview of key literature grounds the purpose of this preliminary examination of the data, which is:

- to highlight gender-based differences in the use of linguistic space by secondary students in small-group discussions; and
- to compare the findings with earlier study of small-group primary discussions.

**The design of the study**

While the study focussed on a qualitative methodology, quantitative methods were employed to increase its robustness and trustworthiness. Miles and Huberman (1994) attest there are three good reasons for resorting to numbers: "to see rapidly what you have in a large batch of data; to verify a hunch or hypothesis; and to keep yourself analytically honest, protecting against bias" (p. 253). Quantitative data was limited to frequency counts of discussion practices such as the number of talk-turns taken by boys and girls, and recording of the gendered use of the linguistic space. Used in this manner,
quantification supported and illuminated the qualitative analysis, but did not involve statistical analysis and manipulation of variables.

Data Collection
Teachers were asked to select a text for a small-group discussion based on a topic being taught within their key learning area of English, the Arts or SoSE. Discussion groups were gender-balanced and varied form six to eight students dependent on teacher preference and the activity to be undertaken. Data was collected from the school sites between August and November, 2004. Collection techniques included: small-group discussions of 20-30 minutes duration; 10 minute interviews with the teacher facilitators; and a ten minute focus group interviews with the student-participants. All discussions and interviews were video-taped, using semi-professional digital audio and video equipment suitable for data collection and CD-ROM development.

As a data collection technique, the use of video ensured a highly accurate documentation of both the teacher and student discourse patterns and the subtle non-verbal interactions within the literature discussions. From a practical perspective, video resolved the difficulties of successfully distinguishing between the tonally similar voices of some boys and girls, which can occur when relying solely on audio recordings.

Two cameras were used for the discussions and the focus group interviews. This approach enabled an overview of the group interaction, in addition to close-up shots of individual students speaking. Before the taping commenced, students were familiarized the video-recording process and given the opportunity to ask questions. This approach assisted students in adjusting to the intrusion of additional people and equipment into their discussion space. The focus group interviews with students occurred immediately after their literature discussion so that details of the discussion were fresh in their minds.

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School Settings
A cross section of co-educational schools was targeted (see Table 1) to seek student representation across a range of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The three major school categories were included: government, Catholic and independent schools.

Table 1 school settings used in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government School (2)</td>
<td>Eastern suburban school. Strong multi-cultural student representation. SES middle to higher range.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic School</td>
<td>Secondary regional college to the west of Melbourne. Strong multi-cultural representation. SES generally in lower range.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent School</td>
<td>Large traditional inner suburban school. Families predominantly of Anglo-Celtic heritage. SES upper middle to higher range.</td>
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Teacher and student participants
Twelve secondary teachers were recruited from Years 7-9 across each school settings. It was not possible to attain gender balance, given the predomination of females in the teaching profession. The teachers were at different career stages, ranging from recent graduates in their early twenties, to those in their mid-fifties with many years of teaching experience. Seventy-four students participated in the study. Grouping of the students was heterogeneous, with teachers taking dynamics into consideration. Teachers were also requested to be mindful that cultural diversity of the students was reflective of their school population.

**Preliminary data analysis of small-group discussions**

Analyses of data are in the early stages, but a key finding that has emerged is that students in the four school-settings indicated that teacher facilitated small-group discussion is a rarity. By contrast, for the majority of students in the study of primary school settings this was a very familiar, frequently used strategy. The secondary student groups overwhelmingly expressed their enjoyment of small-group discussion, having very negative comments about the limitations and frustrations of whole class discussion. Three key themes dominated in the follow up interviews with interview students: domination of the talk by boys, reflective space required for girls, and gender loyalty of the girls versus showmanship and aggressive talk of the boys.

**Domination of the talk by boys**

Overall, both boys and girls agreed that boys dominated the linguistic space in a discussion, be it small-group or whole class. They often attributed this to boys’ loudness, or their deeper voices, a factor over which students have little control, but which they clearly saw as empowering for the boys. Also, students occasionally cited knowledge of the topic of discussion as the factor most likely to determine whether boys or girls dominated the discussion space. Some students did however, acknowledge that there were always exceptions.

> It tends to be the boys. They are really loud in our grade. (Year 8 girl)
>
> Boys, I’d say, because it’s a lot easier… obviously boys have deeper voices than the girls, so it’s easier to hear us then. (Year 8 boy)
>
> The guys sometimes get a bit rowdy. They talk louder than girls and always get their word in. (Year 8 girl)
>
> Well, it depends on the subject, but maybe boys most of the time. (Year 7 girl)
>
> Most of the time it’s boys, but sometimes it’s girls if they’re confident…(Year 7 girl)
>
> Boys do dominate, but there are a few odd girls that tend to stand up and really give it a go. (Year 9 boy)

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Yet, there was usually one boy or girl in a group who would acknowledge that a generalization could not be made.

Some girls have got more confidence and then other girls are shier, and then it’s the same with the boys: some are confident, some aren’t. So some girls would go on with each other, some don’t, and it’s the same with the boys. (Year 9 boy)

In a couple of instances comments appeared to be generalizations that were stereotypical, which went largely unchallenged.

Male dominance in the classroom and in the school is high and everywhere. They just tend to be louder and have more to say than the girls. The girls just tend to calm down after a while and the boys take it further (Year 9 boy)

Boys dominate, definitely, ‘cause in today’s society, you wouldn’t see girls dominate in speech and protest and all that stuff (Year 7 boy).

The fact that girls did not respond to such rash generalizations may be due to the interview questions being asked of the girls and boys separately. Overall, students were more likely to support or build on one another’s comments than contest an opinion or point of view.

Girls frequently claimed that ‘confidence’ was the reason for the boys’ domination of the discussion.

Probably boys, because they are like more confident in these stuff, but overall it probably would be about even, because the girls do say quite a bit as well, ‘cause some of the guys’ ideas are a bit iffy. (Year 8 girl)

Girl 4: I think boys. Well, basically, they are much more confident than us, sometimes.

Girl 2: Most of the time it’s boys, but sometimes it’s girls if they’re confident...

Girl 3: …to stand up.

Girl 2: Yeah, if they could have self-confidence and a high self-esteem. (Year 8 girl)

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In our class, especially, most of the boys are more confident than the girls so they get up and start talking…It’s usually girls who aren’t as confident. (Year 7 girl)

Interestingly the issue of confidence was seldom raised by boys, and generally only in relation to having knowledge about a topic, rather than commenting upon a general sense of confidence, as the student in the second excerpt claims.

Uh, probably again based on what you’re actually talking about, the subject, how much you know about it, um, if you actually feel confident about talking about that subject, so again, confidence. That’s how it really differs. So if it’s more of a girly subject, you know, girls tend to be more up front than boys, and vice versa. (Year 7 boy)

Well, I reckon boys do, ‘cause we speak louder and we are confident to stand up or put up our hands and talk to the teachers than some girls. (Year 8 boy)

This reference to boys’ natural ability to speak louder, coupled with the claim of boys’ confidence is suggests he feels empowered by virtue of his sex.

One of the teachers commented that dominance of the linguistic space in discussions was “less about gender and more about confidence.” Another teacher felt it was the issue of body language used by boys to assert their position of power that had an adverse effect on girls’ level of confidence and use of linguistic space:

Some of the boys can be quite intimidating, their body language…They just sit there - arms folded, body lean back on chair - with their legs stretched out and look at you like “Yeah, whatever”, that kind of thing. So I think that does have some impact on the kids with less confidence.

Several groups and teachers mentioned a gender in-balance within their classes giving boys a distinct advantage, and possibly a reason for the dominant use of linguistic space by boys. While the actual time boys and girls spend speaking has not yet been quantified, a quick glance at the transcripts show that boys unequivocally take more of the talk-turns during the discussion and occupy more of the talk-time.

Teachers responded to the question of the domination of linguistic space very differently to the students. There was little consistency to be found in the comments made by the eleven teachers interviewed for the study. Three teachers believed boys did dominate the discussion, albeit in some instances because there were more boys in the class. Others cited knowledge of the topic, confidence levels, the subject, the issues being discussed and the dynamics of the class as more relevant that the students’ gender in determining the domination of the linguistic space. Perhaps there was more political correctness in the teacher responses, and a mindfulness of policy requirements that girls and boys be afforded equal opportunities for learning.

*Time to ponder – reflective space required by girls*

My earlier study of primary students showed that girls tended to let the boys talk first as they needed the time to ponder their response, before telling the group what they were thinking. The preliminary analysis showed this to be the case. In all but one discussion, it was a boy who made the opening response to a question or topic. In the interviews, girls claimed they needed think time:

Girl 2: …the girls tend to think more before they say things.

Girl 1: Yeah, the boys are too quick -minded.

Girl 2: Yeah I reckon that sometimes we think a little bit more.

Girl 3: Yeah. (Year 7 girls)

Several boys also noted the tendency for boys ‘to shoot from the hip’, rather than to give more considered responses to a question or a comment made by a group member, as this boy’s response demonstrated.

If someone says something, then the boys will just come in and say something before they do the thinking about what they are saying, whereas the girls take might take a few second to actually think about what’s been said, or whether they are going to get into trouble for saying it or not (Year 8 boy)

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One of the teachers also commented on the boys’ spontaneity and implied that boys are more prepared to be risk takers.

I think sometimes the boys come in with the first thing that comes to their minds. So: “I think this so I’m gonna say it” without actually thinking through exactly what is this that I’m saying. …The girls tend to be more reflective and will give more thoughts to what they say, and I think they’re more considerate with each other, whereas the boys tend to be a little bit more…macho, I guess, and just establish positions and want to be heard.

The preparedness of boys to jump in and start the discussion was indicative of this need to be heard from the outset. Conversely, as one of the Year 8 girls explains: “Girls don’t want to embarrass themselves and so sometimes they don’t make many comments, but their comments are well thought through.” She resists stating what is clearly implied by the content, which is that boys comments are often insufficiently considered to the point that they can are reflect poorly on their level of intelligence.

Similarly a Year 9 girl claimed that “girls are more self conscious.” She also demonstrated sensitivity by stating the need to guard against affecting people by comments that were made without thinking. Another Year 9 student observed: “Girls just seem to be a little bit more sensitive …especially when there are many girls around, kind of, yeah, being in touch with their feelings and emotions. (Year 9 girl).

**Gender loyalty versus showmanship and aggressive talk**

Baxter (1999) refers to girls’ affiliative style of talk, which relates closely to the identification of a talk style, which I have termed ‘gender loyalty’. In the following extract a Year 9 girl describes differences she has observed in the way girls and boys operate in small-group work in her class.

If it’s a group conversation, we might just swap opinions between ourselves and we just talk between ourselves and when we come to a conclusion, “What a good idea!” one of us would stick our hands up and say it. So you probably don’t hear us as much, shouting out across the room as the boys, because they…all of them…They may get into groups of 2, like with their friends, and just like, talk about their discussions and then come up with something but a lot of them just shout out their opinions. We sort of talk about our opinions among us then we come up with one conclusion then we stick our hands up and say it. (Year 9 girl)

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A Year 9 girl likewise noted the way girls build on each others’ ideas collaboratively, unlike the boys who were more individualistic in their approach, missing opportunities to jointly construct meaning through talk.

Like, the boys will have different opinions, but with the girls, we all talk to each other about it and we all think of a decision together, whereas the boys just do it. They just say what they think individually. (Year 8 girl).

Conversely one girls did note that “the boys tend to back each other up, like, if one of the guys gets stuck, one of his mates would go on and expand from his idea.” Yet, she then countered what appeared to be positive response by saying, “Some of the girls tend to be shy because they’re scared that the guys are gonna make fun of them so they usually don’t say what they want to say.” (Year 7)

A Year 7 girl also showed awareness of the boys’ lack of support for one another blaming it on a lack of thoughtfulness or basic care for one another: “I reckon sometimes the boys don’t help each other because some boys just don’t care.” What is implied by these comments is that boys are making less use of interpersonal skills than the girls – a finding in several studies on gender-based differences in student engagement in classroom talk (Jenkins & Cheshire 1990; Reay 1991; Sadker & Sadker 1994).

Several boys and girls implied that there was a tendency for boys to be inflexible in their thinking, and unwilling to change their mind in light of new information.

Yeah I think boys probably try to prove their points a lot. They just don’t like to be proven wrong. It’s harder to convince the boys away from their views. (Year 8 boy)

Boys, usually they’re pretty fixed on opinions, they don’t usually stray from their original points of view. (Year 8 girl)

I think, even when guys like…they think that they’ve been proven wrong, they will never admit it, ever. (Year 8 girl)

These comments indicate a lack of open-mindedness, which a closer analysis of discussions will need to unpack and affirm.

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The aggressive and competitive nature of boys; talk was remarked upon by both boys and girls:

Boys want their opinions to be heard because they think they’re right, whereas girls are not so aggressive to voice their opinions. (Year 8 boy)

Boys compete with each other (Year 7 boy)

Boys tend to be a bit more aggressive with what they say and it’s a bit hard to prove them wrong. (Year 8 girl)

Like, the teacher asks the girls, but then the boys keep going. (Year 7 girl)

In the final comment, there is a suggestion that the teachers tend to overlook this habit, or at least deal with the issue in an effective manner. One girl even claimed that boys regularly sabotaged their discussions both in a small-group and in a whole class discussion. Again there was an indication that the teacher failed to act and curtail this practice:

And often they’ll have a smart comment to add in, and us girls will try to be focus and have a good conversation about something, and they’ll put in a smart comment and just throw everybody off course. (Year 7 girl)

Both boys and girls, but more so girls, expressed irritation about the showmanship practised by some boys that interrupted the flow of talk and threw students off course.

Boys say more things and take dominance. …like use big words and sort of put on voices and something like that to get a laugh (Year 9 girl)

Boys are more outrageous and out loud and trying to get their points across, trying to make other people laugh and get attention and stuffing around. Most of the guys do that. (Year 8 girl)

There were obviously discipline issues at stake, which the students were keen to raise in five of the interview groups following the small-group discussion. It would seem that the reason small-group discussions rarely occurred was because of managing the rest of the class while the teacher facilitated a small-group discussion, as this boy suggests:

I agree with what she [Girl 2] said that, like, everyone will be talking over each other, when the small-groups would be doing their own things, like they would be talking louder than the people who are listening to the teacher and in a discussion, everybody would be trying to talk over themselves. (Year 7)
Yet, all students commented on the benefits of working this way, with many claiming that whole class discussions were most unproductive due to discipline issues.

I think you don’t get the chance in the classroom to put forth your ideas, especially because there aren’t enough peers who would listen to you or respect the teacher. I mean, I don’t know… like yesterday, we had a double in English, and we were talking about “Romeo and Juliet”, and most of the time, we spent yelling, or telling people to sit down, and it takes a long time for our class to get settled. So you don’t really have a chance to put forth your opinions, and like <Girl 3’s name> said, get attention from your teacher (Year 9 girl)

It’s easier to get a word in, in a small-group, because in a class, everyone’s shouting, everyone wants their own say and in a big group, the teacher often has trouble trying to control everyone. Most of the time she just stands there putting her hands on her head, which is sort of, you know…<Group laugh>. (Year 8 boy)

The fact that small-group discussions are so infrequent in the secondary schools settings used in this study will clearly impact on the detailed analyses of the discussions, which will follow this preliminary study that has focused on interview data.

Conclusions
An in depth data analysis of the interviews with students and teachers that followed on from the small-group discussions, does not accord with anecdotal comments made by secondary teachers that there is less domination of the linguistic space by boys once they commence secondary school education. On the contrary, both boys and girls express concerns about boys’ domination of the space in both small-group and whole class discussion contexts. Moreover, issues such as the showmanship demonstrated by boys, gender loyalty and discipline issues, which were not evidenced in the primary discussions, have emerged as major themes in the analyses of the interview data.
Consistent with the findings of my study of primary classrooms (Godinho & Shrimpton 2003), the majority of the teachers were unaware that girls occupied less linguistic space in discussions. This finding affirmed research findings in the 1980s (Spender 1982; French & French 1984; Sadker & Sadker 1985), but there is no supportive evidence at this point that boys, girls and teachers collude to allow boys dominance of the linguistic space (Swann & Graddol 1988). Some evidence exists to suggest that teachers do not intervene as actively as they might to prevent boys from undermining the discussion

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process, and to provide girls with the support they need to make their views heard above the dominant and sometimes aggressive voices of the boys.

These preliminary findings reveal a feminist position of showing the girls to be disadvantaged and to some degree powerless in the discussion process. Much has been written about the girls’ disadvantage, but given the current focus on boys and literacy more attention in the analyses of the discussions is needed to identify enabling strategies that encourage boys to adopt masculinities which are less stereotyped and more sensitized to different ways of engaging in the discussion process. This aspect has been largely overlooked in previous studies and is perhaps what Yates (2000) refers to as “the shadowy other”, that now requires to be fleshed out with regard to supporting boys to be more responsive and inclusive of others, and to develop their interpersonal skills.

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