

Discourse domination? The role of gender in seminar interaction

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the effect of the gender of participants on the discourse patterns of university seminars, and compares the interaction patterns in two undergraduate seminars with those in two post-graduate seminars at Rhodes University. In the undergraduate seminars, two different groups of students at first year level in different disciplines were videotaped. The major difference was in terms of composition: in one seminar, there were equal numbers of male and female students, while in the other, female students dominated numerically (75%). In addition, five of the six formed a close-knit group of friends, which proved to be an important factor in the analysis. At the postgraduate level, the student participants were identical and met in the same venue and at the same time on two successive days to discuss the same topic (affirmative action in the workplace). The important difference between the two classes was the fact that the first seminar was led by a female tutor and the second seminar by a male tutor, both under 40 years of age and white, both members of staff in the department, and both known to the students. The discourse patterns in these two sets of seminars were analysed in order to investigate the ways in which the gender of tutors and students influenced the floor-winning and floor-holding conventions of participants.