Over the past several years, the pedagogical technique known as problem-based learning (PBL) has become popular in athletic training education. PBL has received considerable attention at various athletic training educators conferences¹ and was described in the *Journal of Athletic Training*² and *NATA News*.³ In fact, 89% of athletic training educators report PBL to be more valuable than lecturing.⁴

PBL is an instructional approach that uses active, small-group discussions of clinically relevant problems (i.e., case studies) to engage students in learning. It represents a shift from faculty-centered instruction to student-centered learning. Although PBL is considered an important instructional strategy, little attention has been given to the role of student gender in PBL, especially the ways in which men and women communicate and respond differently when placed into collaborative workgroups—a core characteristic of PBL. Furthermore, little research has investigated the effects of gender differences in group learning situations.

The purpose of this column is to illustrate how gender influences group dynamics by communication, leadership, and evaluation, as well as to offer some general pedagogical strategies to enhance PBL as an effective instructional method in athletic training education. Being aware of gender effects in group settings like in PBL can improve the educational process for both men and women.

**Gender Differences in Group Settings**

When PBL and other group-learning strategies are used as instructional methodologies, educators need to know that there are several differences in how men and women generally behave in groups. For example, in groups where leaders are not assigned by an instructor, men characteristically become leaders in what would otherwise be a leaderless mixed-sex group.⁵ In group settings, men prefer a social hierarchy whereas women prefer social equality.⁶ Men believe in what is called an “equity norm” in that group members should be rewarded for individual contributions to the group. Women believe in an “equality norm” in that all members of the group should be rewarded equally regardless of individual contri-
butions to the group. While working in groups, male students tend to focus on the knowledge and skills needed to complete a task, whereas female students tend to focus on being a team. Women are typically social and emotional with other female group members, and they appreciate the collaborative nature of learning that a group provides. In addition, women in mixed-sex groups demonstrate more tentative behaviors than men do, especially when communicating in groups. Women use less powerful speech, speak more politely and less often, and use more disclaimers and tag questions, which are questions added after declarative statements to verify information or seek confirmation, for example, “I think this is the best answer, don’t you?” Students who use disclaimers and tag questions are usually perceived as less confident and less assertive.

Gender Differences in Communication

As PBL continues to become more prevalent, it is imperative that athletic training educators understand and appreciate that men and women communicate in different ways. Acknowledging that men and women are likely to respond to each other differently when placed in group settings as in PBL is important for effective instruction. For example, Krupnick found that male undergraduates spoke 2.5 times longer than their female peers, and Heim reports that men are likely to do 96% of the interrupting in small-group settings. In other words, men cut short the dialogue of others in order to be heard. Kaplowitz and Block suggest that when male students interrupt, they might fail to fully recognize the contributions and insights of their female classmates, and the female students who are interrupted limit their participation in the group by staying out of discussions for the remainder of the class. Because men tend to direct conversations and interrupt more frequently than women, and women are more likely to wait their turn to speak in a group, both men and women can miss out on a key goal of PBL, which is teamwork.

Heim states that men and women see the world from different points of view. Consider verbal bantering, for example—teasing or harmless practical jokes. Men usually view this type of communication as friendly exchanges between two individuals vying for position in the hierarchy and in fact might come to perceive the experience as bonding. Women, however, might perceive verbal-bantering exchanges as cruel or insulting and something that would most likely damage a relationship. Although both perceptions are equally accurate, educators must be cognizant of what Tannen describes as “report talk” for men and “rapport talk” for women. Men generally are more concerned with achieving goals, producing results, and finding solutions, the typical elements found in a report. Women generally are more interested in fostering relationships, working together, and developing closeness with others, behaviors that describe rapport. Markel ascertains that “women’s communication patterns are more focused on maintaining the group, and men’s on completing the task.” Thus, men and women might approach PBL with different goals and rules because of their differing communication styles.

Gender Differences in Leadership

Men and women work differently in groups and thus might express opposing leadership styles. For instance, many men tend to direct groups like a conductor leading an orchestra, giving directions and assigning tasks to individuals. Women tend to move toward supportive roles, making sure that decisions are made collaboratively, relationships are established, and everyone is content. Men see the world as a hierarchical model and want to know the status of individuals in the group, establishing who is in charge. Women are more likely to have a social orientation, value attachment, and seek to bond with others as a means to success. When unaware of how one’s gender might influence participation in groups, both male and female students can become frustrated by their coeds’ approach. In other words, students might have unrealistic expectations of the opposite sex, especially relating to communication and leadership characteristics. That is, they might assume that the opposite sex has the same general communication and leadership characteristics as their own when in fact they are usually different.

Peer Evaluation

Peer evaluation is a standard component of PBL. It allows each student in the group to assess and evaluate the other students of the group with some form of written rubric. The purpose of written peer evaluations is to improve learning by allowing all students to have input and to share this feedback with their