LET'S TALK ABOUT POWER: HOW TEACHER USE OF POWER SHAPES RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNING

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Teachers' use of power in learning environments affects our students' experiences, our teaching experiences, and the extent to which learning goals are met. The types of conversations we hold or avoid with students send cues regarding how we use power to develop relationships, influence behaviour and entice motivation. Reliance on prosocial forms of power, such as referent, reward, and expert, have a positive impact on outcomes such as learning and motivation, as well as perceived teacher credibility. Overuse of antisocial forms of power that include legitimate and coercive powers negatively affect these same outcomes. In this paper, we share stories from our teaching experiences that highlight how focusing on referent, reward and expert power bases to connect, problem solve, and negotiate challenges with our students has significantly enhanced our teaching practice. We provide resources that can be used by teachers to become aware of and utilize prosocial power strategies in their practice through self-reflection and peer and student feedback.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we explore how our use of power as teachers affects our learning environments, drawing on the research on teacher power use in post-secondary settings. We will also share our own experiences dealing with classroom challenges and power dynamics, and explore how verbal and non-verbal communication strategies impact perceptions of fairness, credibility, and respect. Finally, we suggest strategies that teachers can use to explore how power is perceived in their own teaching contexts, as well as ideas for enhancing communication, understanding, and positive learning environments.

Teacher use of power in learning environments warrants continued attention because it strongly influences teacher-student relationships, students' motivation to learn, and learning outcomes. (Finn, 2012; Frymier & Houser, 2000; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Mottet, Richmond & McCroskey, 2006; Myers & Bryant, 2002; Roach, Richmond & Mottet, 2006; Schrodt, Witt, Myers, Turman & Barton & Jernberg, 2008; Teven & Herring, 2005). Research on teacher power use in post-secondary contexts is rooted in the theoretical model of French and Raven (1959), who identified five bases of relational power. These five bases include referent, expert, reward, legitimate, and coercive. A description of each power base and how it is expressed in learning environments is described in Table 1.

Table 1

The five power bases from which teachers communicate and negotiate relationships and influence student behaviours (French & Raven, 1959; McCroskey et al., 1985)

Power Base	Description	
Referent	Teachers connect with students, identify and empathize with students' needs and concerns, are open and approachable.	Prosocial forms of power
Reward	Teachers reward students for good performance or complying with requests (positive feedback, bonus points, extra credit).	
Expert	Teachers have expertise in the subject they are teaching, and expertise on how to teach the subject.	
Legitimate	Teachers are expected to set rules and expectations, and have authority over students.	Antisocial forms of power
Coercive	Teachers punish students for poor performance or not complying with requests (negative feedback / attention, penalties).	

The prosocial bases of power have been found to be positively associated with learning outcomes (McCroskey, Richmond, Plax & Kearney, 1985; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney & Plax, 1987), student motivation (Richmond, 1990), and teacher effectiveness and credibility (Finn, 2012; Schrodt et al., 2007; Teven & Herring, 2005). The antisocial power bases have been negatively associated with learning outcomes (McCroskey et al.,1985; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond et al., 1987), student motivation (Richmond, 1990), and teacher effectiveness and credibility (Ellis, 2004; Finn, 2012; Schrodt, Witt & Turman, 2007).

OUR STORIES OF TEACHER POWER USE

In our teaching experiences, we have found that attending to power dynamics in our classrooms has lead to better learning environments, by creating a more collaborative and positive tone. We recognize that dedicating time to develop positive social dynamics and having thoughtful strategies to deal with challenges is as important as designing challenging and engaging learning activities. In this section, we share two examples of how social power was negotiated with our students for positive outcomes.

Jalal's Story – "When I'm thinking I look grumpy": emphasizing referent power

I was involved in teaching a first-year service course at the University of Calgary from the Fall of 2008 until the Winter of 2014. During this period, I taught 19 different sections of this course with enrollment ranging from 100 to 175 students per section. Every semester, students are given the option to complete student surveys rating their experience in a course. These are end-of-semester rating instruments that students voluntarily and anonymously complete. The instrument incorporates a Likert-scale response for each question where a numerical score of 1 corresponds with 'strongly disagree' and 7 corresponds with 'strongly agree'. One item on this 12-question instrument asks students to rate the extent to which "students are treated

respectfully." This question is particularly informative as it is related to students' perceptions of power dynamics. Hence, our discussion in this story will focus on this question. The responses of students for all the sections that I taught are shown in Figure 1. It is worth noting that in Canada, the Winter semester runs from January to April, and the Spring semester spans May and June.
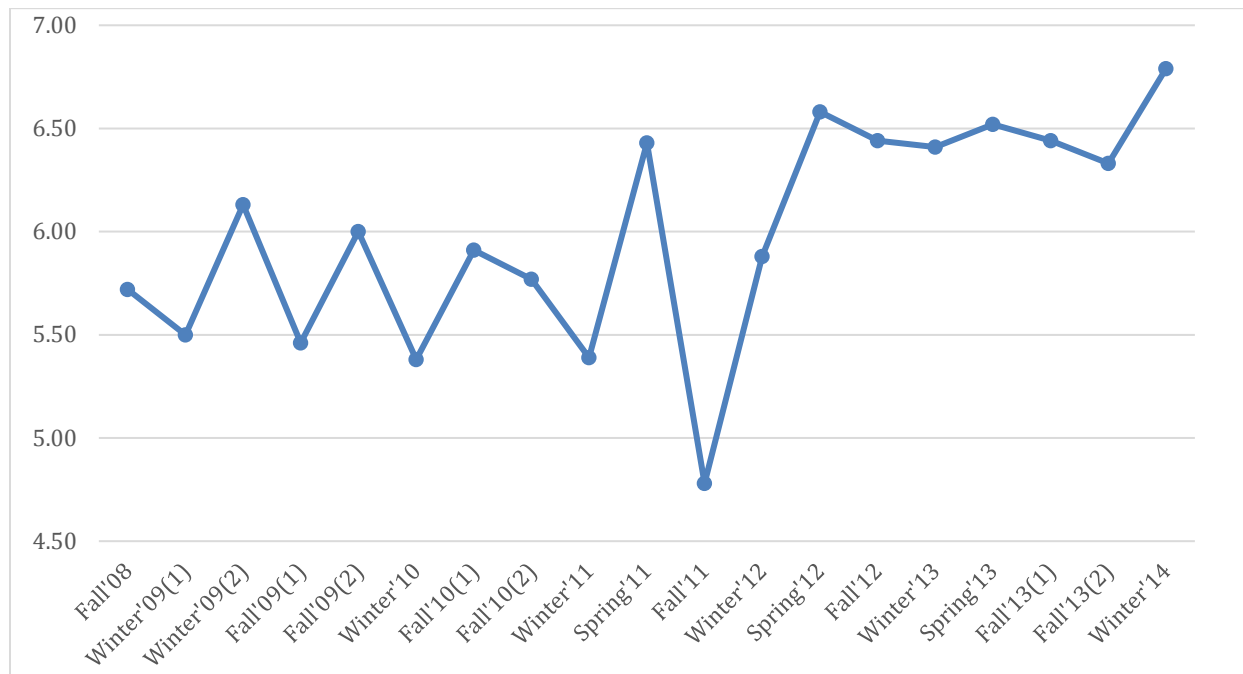

Figure 1. Student ratings for "students treated with respect" USRI item for the period from Fall 2008 to Winter 2014. (The ratings are on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to strongly disagree and 7 to strongly agree)

Figure 1 shows fluctuations in the relevant question on respect, from as low as 4.8 to as high as 6.5, until Spring 2012 where this item is scored consistently at 6.5 ($\pm$ 0.3). At the end of the semester and in addition to the Likert-scale instruments, students are also given the chance to provide anonymous feedback in a free-form. The students' written comments indicated that they found me angry, intimidating, condescending, and unwelcoming to their questions. This was very surprising to me since I had the opposite perception of myself, especially my openness to student questions in the classroom.

Reflection and discussion on this issue with my colleague, the co-author of this paper, suggested that my students were not getting a chance to know me, and without a sense of connection, misinterpreting my facial expressions in a negative light. My neutral face and serious demeanor in the classroom gave the impression of an unapproachable and grumpy teacher. To complicate the matter, my look gets worse when I am thinking, as I typically furrow my brow when processing a question and developing my response. Hence, a challenging question by a student would give my students the impression that I was annoyed at the disruption, discouraging any further interaction in the classroom.

Starting in Spring 2012, I employed an activity on the first day of class to explain and diffuse any misconceptions about my external look and facial expressions. I shared with my students that I had received feedback from past students that I appear angry and uninviting, but that it was both my neutral face and my thinking face. Throughout the semester I reminded

students of my neutral look. By making it transparent to students that I was aware of how I could be perceived, and what the true meaning of my expressions were, I developed a connection with my students that showed I was human and cared for their learning and wellbeing. With no other major changes to the course, the data of Figure 1 suggests that students misinterpreted my neutral face as a sign of disrespect.

This misinterpretation can magnify the reaction of students to instructor actions. The Fall of 2011 shows the lowest score of 4.8 in Figure 1. There is an interesting story associated with this particularly low score, and we believe that misinterpretation of the instructor's look has aggravated the reaction to this incident. There was an incident during the semester that lasted less than a minute and left an everlasting negative impression on the students' perception of my respect for them. During this semester, two students who typically sat in the front row consistently talked throughout the lesson to the extent that it was distracting and annoying to me. I attempted to communicate my displeasure through my body language to these students including standing close to them and staring at them while they were talking. The message did not curb the students' behavior, leading me to one day speak aggressively to the students in front of the class. This short-lived incident (my outburst perhaps lasted about 20 seconds) was perceived by students as an unnecessary abuse of coercive and legitimate power. The student evaluation written comments that semester included more than a dozen statements from different students citing this incident as inappropriate and a cause for concern regarding how students are treated.

Understanding how my look is perceived by others and familiarizing myself with the social power dynamics in the classroom, I was able to take proactive measures so that the wrong perception of my look was not considered an exercise of coercive power or an abuse of legitimate power. This understanding allowed me to connect better with my students, properly exercising my referent power.

Leslie's Story – Midterm gone wrong: sharing expert & reward power

In my first year of teaching, I was assigned to teach a senior undergraduate course in a challenging topic in the geoscience curriculum – structural geology. Things were going well in the class of forty students, and we had developed a good rapport. Students were developing skills, knowledge, and confidence in this challenging topic. Leading up to the midterm, we had numerous class conversations about what to expect, as I wanted the performance expectations to be clear and understood by my students. Meanwhile, I worked hard to construct test questions that were challenging and fair.

On the day of the midterm, all seemed to be going well until halfway through the test period. I noticed the body language of the students shifting, with many looking up at me with apparent looks of confusion and frustration. I circulated around the room to try to understand what was happening and noticed that students were nowhere close to finishing. As students handed in their tests they avoided making eye contact with me, and some outwardly expressed frustration by throwing their tests on the desk.

Looking over the tests, I discovered that while the students were performing well overall, not a single student had finished all four sections. To make matters more complex, not all students approached the test in a linear order. Some had completed sections 3 and 4 completely (they were worth more points) and chipped away at the questions in section 1 and 2. Some completed sections 1 and 2, and then worked on pieces of sections 3 and 4. Some had finished a portion of all four sections. It was clear that the test questions were appropriately challenging,

but it was too long. My first reaction was to grade the test without making any changes or accommodations. After all, I had let them know what to expect, and at this point I expected that they would know how to pace themselves accordingly. I also expected that in a senior level course it was explicit that they would have to work hard and stretch themselves academically. My second, less defensive reaction was to seek advice from a more experienced and trusted colleague. She suggested that I talk to the students about the situation, listen to concerns, and invite students' suggestions for a possible solution. I weighed her advice carefully and decided to have this discussion in the next class. I felt vulnerable about admitting I had made a mistake, but I did and the discussion went surprisingly well. I shared with the students that maintaining the trust and connection we had built were important to me, as was maintaining a high-level of academic challenge. I said I was keen to hear their ideas on how we could move forward. After class, I considered the suggestions that were given and chose the option of calculating the percentage scores out of 2/3 of the intended total score. This number was determined based on how much of the test the majority of the students had finished. I communicated the decision to the class and we proceeded to have a great semester together. When I received my teaching evaluations a few months later, I was surprised to discover that the numerical USRI scores were consistent with my other classes. I had anticipated lower scores in the questions on assessment. Reading the written feedback, I learned that the students were impressed with how the midterm issue was addressed. Relating and seeking to understand students' concerns (referent power), inviting them to help make pedagogical decisions (expert power) that impacted their grades (reward power) had a positive and lasting effect.

DEVELOPING POWER AWARENESS

Paying attention to power in learning environments is an important component of teaching and learning. It can also be challenging to gain insight and get feedback on how our communication and behaviour impacts our students. The Teacher Power Use Scale (TPUS), developed by Schrodt et al. (2007), is an instrument designed to measure students' perceptions of the use of power in the classroom. The TPUS consists of 30 Likert-type items asking students to evaluate the extent to which their teachers use five types of power in the classroom. Questions are framed from the perspective of students' experiences (e.g. "My teacher demonstrates commitment to the class by being authentic and genuine when interacting with students.'', and ''My teacher demonstrates that he/she considers the position of Professor to be superior to that of a student.''). We have developed the reframed TPUS (r-TPUS), so the questions are positioned to be self-reflective statements for teachers, allowing it to serve as self-reflective tool, or as a resource to facilitate peer feedback (Table 2). We describe suggested uses of the TPUS and r-TPUS below.

Table 2

The r-tpus can be used for teacher self-reflection on behaviours and communication strategies associated with the five bases of power that shape relationships

Referent Power
I build rapport by relating to students in an open and approachable manner.
I check in to ensure students understand what is expected of them.
I work to see the learning experience from my students' perspective.
I am genuine and authentic when interacting with students.
I identify commonalities shared with students.
I relate to students by sharing personal stories.
Reward Power
I publically recognize students who exceed expectations in course performance.
I negotiate details like assignment deadlines with high-performing students.
I commend students when they demonstrate mastery of course material.
I give out compliments or praise to students who follow instructions.
I reward students for complying with requests.
Expert Power
I ensure lessons and assignments are clearly organized and well delivered.
I demonstrate advanced knowledge/ expertise in course content areas.
I design courses in a way that's best for student learning.
I discuss current theory and research in courses.
Legitimate Power
I communicate to students to never disobey instructions or ignore requests. .
I emphasize that decisions and policies will be backed by administration
I communicate to students that teacher needs take priority over theirs.
I encourage students who question course policies to drop the class.
I maintain formal and distant relationships with students.
I maintain complete and total control of the classroom.
Coercive Power
I draw attention to students if they do not perform up to expectations.
I assert my authority if students question or challenge course policy.
I put students on guilt trips if they hand in assignments late.
I punish students if they do not follow instructions.
I glare at students who are disruptive in class.

Note: This table is modified from the Teacher Power Use Scale (TPUS) of Schrodt et al. (2007)

Student feedback

The TPUS instrument can be administered to students as a way to obtain anonymous feedback on their perceptions of power use in a learning environment. Alternatively, the TPUS items could be used to develop focus group questions or prompts to invite a discussion with students. We recommend having a neutral colleague facilitate the focus group or class discussion to ensure students feel comfortable and safe sharing their perceptions, and to reduce social desirability bias that can occur when the teacher is in the room.

Peer feedback

The r-TPUS could be used to facilitate a peer-to-peer dialogue about power use behaviours. We recommend engaging in dialogue with peers who serve as critical friends, providing alternate lenses to view beliefs about power use in teaching practice. The TPUS or r-TPUS could also be used as a guide for peer observation of teaching for feedback on power use in the classroom.

Self-Reflection

The r-TPUS instrument could be used to guide self-reflection on power use during and after a course. Student comments from formal course evaluation processes can also be reviewed using the r-TPUS as a guide to look for comments that reflect how teacher power use may be perceived.

SUMMARY

Understanding power use in the classroom is essential to setting up positive, prosocial learning environments and avoid abusing (or the perception of abusing) teacher power. In our experience, paying attention to power use and responding to students' feedback on power has lead to positive relationships between our students and ourselves. In this paper, we shared personal stories that show how awareness of power use can positively impact learning environments and teaching and learning experiences. We recommend adopting strategies that help you to get a sense of students' perceptions of the balance of power, understand where enhancements can be made regarding the use of referent, expert and reward pro-social power, and minimize use of legitimate and coercive power to influence student behaviour and motivation.

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