

POWER AND THE ESTEEMED PROFESSORATE

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Abstract: Often professors of higher education do not recognize the difference between teaching subject matter and teaching students. They emulate their former professor mentors without much analysis of the assets/liabilities of classroom behaviors. The absence of teaching methods in the teaching curriculum of college/university contributes to the problem. The following article describes a composite picture of the esteemed professorate depicted by an accumulation of life experiences, student stories, professorial reputations and caricatures. The categories of professorial type do not represent exclusivity, but indeed are anticipated to overlap. The professorate needs to strive to use teaching methods which empower students to learn, just as we all strive to encourage the corporate world to empower their employees.

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Introduction

One of the most enjoyable experiences the senior author of this article remembers as a college student included hearing many provocative stories about university professors. The stories especially focused on the peculiarities the professors demonstrated in the classroom, whereby the teller of the stories would sharpen the details of the unique qualities of a professor. One story in particular involved a professor who paced from wall to wall at a quick rate while he lectured, using long “uh’s” as he marched across the room, rubbing his head, never making eye contact with his class. Witnessing this peculiarity was found to be most disconcerting. Another story involved a professor who, in an effort to motivate students, systematically yelled at them, singling out individuals in front of their classmates, telling them how stupid they were, assuring them they would never pass his course unless they made some radical changes. Another story involved a particularly handsome professor who enjoyed talking about what he did outside the classroom, his travels, his publications, but most abundantly his stories about the women in his life. During class he enjoyed flirting with the female students while playfully putting the male students down. Finally, in another story, students appeared to take over the class. They talked the professor out of using the textbook, talked him out of Friday classes, and talked him out of exams. In one instance this professor even called off class and went with the students to a local pizzeria to watch a football game. The students gathered in his office every day for counsel, and could frequently be heard laughing or crying. Such stories about the professorate continue among students, and while they may be entertaining or perhaps unbelievable and un-enchanting, each of us as professors may develop a pattern of behavior which may elicit a myriad of reactions, including negative reactions, from students, administrators, or others.

Purpose

The literature concerning classroom behavior of higher education personnel appears sparse, although several sources exist and give perspective on the problem. Arnove (1971), Kowalski and Cangemi (1983) linked campus rebellion to unprofessional behavior on the part of the professorate, both in and out of the classroom. Arnove (1971) validated a strong potential relationship between the development of student militancy and professorial behavior. Additionally, college dropout rates appear to have some relationship to the behavior of college professors both in and out of the classroom.

The problem

Many professors do not know the difference between teaching subject matter and teaching students. Often professors emulate their mentors without much analysis of the assets/liabilities of their mentors classroom behavior. Sometimes when a professor receives his or her Ph.D. degree a belief is developed that their subject area “expertise” makes them immune from continuing to learn about teaching per se and motivating students. The absence of teaching methods in the curriculum requirement for college/university teachers contributes to the problem. The value-laden perception that research is the highest priority on many university/college campuses, often relegating teaching as unimportant and less significant, creates another significant contribution to the problem.

Sources and types of classroom power

The currency of leadership, essential to influencing others and maintaining classroom order, involves a wide variety of factors. Varying authors (French & Raven, 1959; Baldrige, 1971; Kanter, 1977; Hackman & Johnson, 1991; King, 1987) describe sources, types, and uses of power essential to effective teaching. *Eight primary sources of power include: support systems, information, credibility, visibility, legitimacy, persuasiveness, charisma, and agenda setting.* **Support systems** include both formal and informal opportunities for networking. Formal support systems include the chain of command in the organization, while informal support systems include friendships within the organization and may even include support outside the organization. Historically, professors hold formal power when enjoying the full support of administrators. Today, students have rights and methods for challenging the behavior of professors and subsequent grades. **Information**, the second source of power, assumes the professorate has more information about subject matter and university policy than students. New students can be intimidated by knowledgeable professors, especially before they learn how the system works. Those professors who have been around the longest often understand best how the system works. The third power source, **credibility**, resides in how much respect one attains. We rely on highly credible people who have established a history of experience and expertise. Professors who flounder before their classes may appear unprepared and lose their potential for maintaining classroom power. If professors lose their credibility among students, they often resort to strategies for maintaining classroom power which may appear clandestine, back-handed, mean, and vengeful. Ironically, these tactics never regain the trust of students.

Visibility, the fourth source of power, means taking full responsibility for the classroom, implementing creative and unusual strategies for imparting knowledge, using a variety of approaches to learning, including experiential, group work, lecture/discussion, so students receive a variety of ways to learn. These strategies act as a way of communicating seriousness about career development, a repertoire of teaching methods, and a concern for student learning. **Legitimacy**, the fifth source of power, works in concert with visibility and involves having respected power players commend one publicly, thereby creating acceptance among any would be doubters. When administrators or other professors speak highly of their professorial colleagues, students respect them. When advisors recommend a professor for a course, students take notice. Theoretically, when someone does a good job, legitimate power is attained— especially when administrators publicly acknowledge and reward their success, such as with professor, public service, or researcher of the year awards.

Persuasiveness, the sixth source of power, determines how successfully a professor uses rational or emotional appeals. One's ability to persuade depends on personality, task content, motivation, and confidence. Among these, Andrews (1987) argued confidence in personal conviction to subject matter creates an ability to communicate arguments persuasively. Apparently male professors rate higher than female professors unless both receive training in the use of critical methods, (analysis of fallacies in argument), claiming that once trained, female professors become more confident and male professors become better listeners (Montgomery & Burgoon, 1980). The seventh source of power, **charisma**, includes the trust and magnetism needed for leading a group. Charisma appears to be linked to physical appearance. Taller, physically fit, attractive people who take up a lot of psychic space tend to elicit

charisma. Powerful eye contact, dynamic energy, and a smiling mouth full of clean, white teeth add to the dimensions of charisma. We tend to think of male professors as charismatic, while we refer to female professors as poised, possessing strength, courage or beauty. The last source of power, **agenda setting**, rests in planning and executing a lesson plan established before entering the classroom. Telling students how the professor will proceed on any given day, preparing a detailed syllabus in advance, and making clear expectations so students know how to get the grade they desire, all help to establish who is in charge. Allowing students to input ideas, even subject matter, causes students to feel empowered by the professor and accomplishes an atmosphere of fairness. Access to the professor, either between classes or during office hours, provides opportunities for students to express their private interests and concerns (Lukes, 1974; Brown, 1986). Professors who make themselves unavailable cause students to perceive them as not interested in their concerns and may cause student opinions of professors to become distorted or even hostile.

While operating in a classroom, being aware of the kind of power which works best for a professor makes it easier to access that type. The five most commonly known types of power include; *coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent* (French & Raven, 1959). Coercive power bases its effectiveness on the ability to administer punishment or give negative reinforcements. Harper and Hirokawa (1988) discovered male professors relied more often on punishment-based power strategies, such as “warning ultimatums.” Female professors relied more often on altruism and rationale-based strategies, indicating a preference for counseling (“Is there anything I can do to help?”) or explanation (“You need to do this because...”) when attempting to gain compliance from students.

The second type of power, **reward power**, rests on the ability of the professor to deliver something valued by the student. People who can deliver money, jobs, political support, or other significant things, have something students want and, therefore, become extremely powerful in the classroom. **Legitimate power**, the third type, resides in a professor's position rather than the actual professor as a person. This type of formal power relies on position in an authority hierarchy. Occasionally, professors who have legitimate power fail to recognize it, or access it. Having power *over*, rather than power *with*, may be somewhat confusing to new professors accustomed to playing the role of student (Helgesen, 1990).

The fourth type, **expert power**, relies on a professor's special knowledge and expertise in a given area. Experts influence because they supply needed information and skills. In the classroom, this type of power becomes enhanced when professors deliver their information using a communication style which varies in volume, pitch, timing, and quality. Using dynamism and high energy, lively eyes, and a serious or happy countenance, depending on the subject matter, puts these particular professors at warp speed ahead of other professors in the university, in terms of power. In our culture, those with expertise demonstrate more power than those without proper credentials. However, demonstrating practical knowledge and skill can sometimes substitute for credentials. Anyone can have knowledge and skill if they formally and informally prepare themselves. The last type, **referent power**, includes the idea that when we admire someone, we allow them to influence us (French & Raven, 1959). Referent power acts similar to role model power. Having referent power depends on respecting, liking, and holding a professor in esteem. This kind of power develops over a long period of time.

Among these five sources of power, creating a positive classroom climate involves choosing the most appropriate compliance-gaining tactics, which tend to lead to greater satisfaction of the university experience (Plax, 1986). McCroskey et al., (1985) claimed relying on expert, reward, and referent power appeared to produce the greatest satisfaction, while reliance on coercive and legitimate power had the opposite effect. Rahim (1989) found legitimate power useful in gaining compliance, but satisfaction from students decreased. Expert and referent power bases correlated with both student compliance and both professor and student satisfaction. Masculine professors stereotypically use more aggressive power strategies, while female professors choose power strategies more closely linked to relational maintenance. Androgynous professors would likely choose compliance gaining strategies more situationally appropriate, rather than selecting those consistent with gender role identity.

Perceived Powerlessness

The two major players in classrooms include professors and students (Gamson, 1968). Professors act as targets of influence and agents of social control. In that capacity, they have the power to make binding decisions concerning the lives of students. Students, on the other hand, have the opposite role. They initiate influence, but are targets of social control. Professors cannot produce social control if students refuse to comply. So, even though we often think of students as having perceived powerlessness, they do, in fact, hold the key to providing professors with their power. It all depends on how much students trust professors. Students will trust professors when they expect them to make good

decisions. Students probably will not mobilize against professors if trust is high. *When trust is low, student groups will probably make an effort to grasp power away from the professor in some way.* Consequently, it becomes paramount for professors to keep students satisfied in reasonable ways. Further, it is incredibly important for both professors and students to recognize they all have power, or the capacity to access power, through some source. Students do not have authority, but *they do have a number of other sources of important power, most notably coalition formation and the threat of violence.*

The existence of multiple forms of power means the ability for professors to make decisions over students is somewhat constrained. They must weigh the possibility which could generate resistance after which they may find themselves outflanked. Curiously, professors may seem more powerful to their students than they (the professors) may realize. Professors may see students as having more power than the students themselves actually realize they have. The reverse also may occur in which professors think they have more power than they actually have, forgetting that students can rebel. This may manifest itself in professors' controlling behavior and close supervision, becoming overly concerned with rules and procedures, and focusing on turf rights.

The concept of power both fascinates and challenges us. Who has it? In what forms does it become manifest? How and when should it be used? Students continue to tell stories about professors' behavior operating in the classroom today. As we listen to the stories we begin to see patterns of behavior which typify certain professors.

Categories of Classroom Behavior

The **enlightened** professor demonstrates a superior, smarter than everyone else attitude. He or she expresses this attitude through both verbal and non-verbal means. Verbally, these professors use sentence structures and vocabulary understood by few to impress students in an effort to establish a power strategy of expertise. They often prefer to avoid students, and appear aloof when addressed. Consequently, the classroom climate exudes hostility, and students quickly pickup on this, lose interest, and prefer to have as little interaction with the professor as possible.

As a colleague, the expert professor protects his or her area of expertise often by crushing anyone, including a colleague, who may attempt to step into the perceived “sacred” zone. As a member of a journal editorial board, one such professor systematically rejected nine or ten out of ten articles submitted, giving castrating reviews with the goal of “annihilating” anyone who might approach his area of expertise. When submitting the same articles to professionals engaged in the “real world,” or other organizations it was demonstrated time after time the majority of the same articles were found to be entirely acceptable.

The **research king/queen** type of professor also demonstrates a superior attitude by presenting esoteric research findings. They attempt to “snow” students with their knowledge, often failing to enable students to apply the research, or even understand it. Actual teaching is a hurdle the research king/queen must overcome in order to get to what they find more rewarding, which, of course, is research.

The **tough** professor uses coercive power strategies. He/she relishes in the reputation of being known as the professor who requires students to spend the majority of their outside-of-class time preparing

for their class, as though it were the only class the students were taking. They thrive on the reputation of being very, very hard on students, rarely taking into account a student's personal problems, and delight in strictly adhering to the letter of the law ("If you're one minute late don't bother entering **this** class.") The individual sees himself/herself as a hardliner, the **real** professor, the one students will remember years to come. This professor enjoys being feared, often mistaking fear for respect, and delights in knowing students will talk about his or her toughness when they congregate in the student center.

The **boss** professor wants all the power, intends to keep it all, shares none of it. This professor typically uses the lecture style of communication only, listens little, invites little input from students, plays power games with students such as pop quizzes, surprise recitations, harsh grading schemes (example: 69.4 is a D and cannot be a C- even though half of the exam involved essay questions and hence was subjective in assigning a numerical value) and enjoys intimidating students. These professors may threaten to deduct points from tests if students ask them to go to the trouble of finding their exams to go over them. Or, another example: On the first day of classes, if a student raises his or her hand, the professor might respond, "Put that flag down. You don't know enough to question me." Or, "I know during the summer most of you have read nothing more than a Wendy's menu." The goal here involves lording it over students, letting them know how significant the professor is and how insignificant students are. This type of professor can rarely ever admit to being wrong or making a mistake.

The **encyclopedic** professor acts as a fountain of knowledge, relying on expertise as a source of power. This professor spouts names, dates, research methodologies, findings, studies, etc., with incredible regularity. The ability to recite data is remarkable, but that's about it.

These professors have little “real world” experience, so are unable to apply their knowledge to real life utility. This professor acts as a trash masher of information, which in the future will be replaced by a computer CD ROM.

The **ringmaster** professor sees the class as a circus. These types enjoy classroom confusion, noise, and general chaos. They view the confusion as an opportunity to crack the whip, to tame the animals—as it were, to silence the noise. They use rhetorical strategies designed to produce confusion, often practicing double speak. Students often don’t know what this professor has just said after he or she has just elaborated long dissertations of gobbledygook. The confusion often provides an opportunity for this type of professor to take students aside and help them, thereby giving them an opportunity to appreciate him or her as a wonderful helper.

The **wagon master** professor often views the class as needing his or her protection, so he/she symbolically views the class as needing to “get in a circle.” This professor provides only some information, and withholds other information. In this way, the professor always knows more than the students. The professor acts as a gatekeeper/protector of information. The implication for the students? They can’t handle the real truth; it would be too overwhelming. So the professor will protect them from it and makes comments like, “You won’t ever have to know that, so don’t even ask.”

The **team captain** professor often views the class as his or her team members. The professor requires loyalty and cooperation. Expectations for students include the idea that everyone will do hard work equal to that of their classmates. As students progress through this class, they often hear pronouns such as *we/they*, implying the class as a unit has enemies “out there” of which they should be aware. Also,

once the class disperses, usually the class will experience a sense of loss because the team atmosphere became their family, their closest allies.

The **warden** professor often views the class as prisoners. He or she starts class when the bell rings, takes roll immediately, accepts no excused absences, no late papers, no late exams or quizzes, and does not dismiss the class until he or she says, "class is dismissed." Class may often be held longer than the bell since this professor sees the students as his or her prisoners. The students recognize this professor watches them carefully and punishes them if they step out of line in any way. This type of professor relies on punishment as a strategy of power.

The **den mother/father** professor views the class as scouts. The den mother or father guides the class, using a helpful style of communicating. Students are required to accomplish certain assignments in order to earn points (badges) which may be applied to the final grade. Frequent uses of ritual and ceremony accompany this style of teaching, which includes rites of passage, making students prove themselves. Students are required to jump through many hoops, often of no value except to show who's in charge. This professor relies on reward and punishment as methods of holding power in the classroom.

The **fairy God mother/father** professor views the class as helpless. The professor, on the other hand, can fix anything. Often this professor creates a false sense of security for students, implying he or she (the professor) will make sure everyone gets through the class. If he or she requires a difficult assignment or test, the professor helps the students with the assignment rather than sending the students out to do the assignment themselves. He or she may provide all the questions to tests so that students don't have to work hard digging out difficult material. Students become dependent on the fairy God mother/father, and this appears to provide a sense of security for the professor.

The **host/hostess** professor sees the class as his or her guests. This professor attempts to entertain the guests, often bringing treats, taking them on field trips, bringing in guest speakers. The goal of this professor includes the idea that students need to have a “good time” in their class. This professor attempts to create a fun, party atmosphere. Communication involves a non-critical relationship with students. This professor has difficulty evaluating students, since they are his or her guests.

The **mother/father** professor sees the class as his or her children. This professor sees the class as immature, irresponsible, and rebellious. The role of professor involves taking care of the students. This professor counsels students, gives them rides home, may hold class at home, takes care of their needs when they become ill, holds special classes for those who aren't able to keep up, tutors students and generally “spoon feeds” students. From this professor students don't learn how to learn, they learn how to absorb. When these students leave college, they go into the community ill prepared to act as self-starters. The mother/father professor gains power from her or his students through their dependence on them.

The **garbage collector** professor sees the class as receptacles of learning. This professor sees the class as willing to accept whatever the professor says, whether it be valuable truths, or trash. The professor believes he or she can tell the students anything and they will accept it. This professor often exhibits a lack of preparation, expecting students to respect him or her because of his or her position. This professor relies on position to maintain power in the classroom.

Conclusion

These symbolic categories of the professorate provide a few examples of how professors interact with students, how they view students and maintain power in the classroom. Despite some of the categories, each of these types of professors may exhibit both positive and negative behaviors and communication styles, and some indeed may overlap. Maintaining power in the classroom contributes to a positive learning experience for students and professors accomplish this in some unique ways. The five most commonly known types of power include: coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent (French & Raven, 1959). Eight primary sources of power include: support systems, information, credibility, visibility, legitimacy, persuasiveness, charisma, and agenda setting. How do we enhance power effectively? Yukl (1981, pp43-58) suggested these guidelines to build and exercise power: Students will more likely comply with a professor's instructions if he or she provides them clearly and confidently, making sure instructions are legitimate, explaining reasons for the instructions, following the chain of command, insisting on compliance, and verifying compliance. Furthermore, professors desiring to strengthen their expert power bases should seek appropriate education and training to overcome deficiencies such as teaching methods. They may seek human relations training to enhance their referent power base. If professors want to be admired, and therefore be more able to influence others, they need to understand that being considerate of other peoples' needs and feelings, treating them fairly, and defending their interests when acting as their representative, becomes paramount.

The problem of negative or unusual classroom behavior continues on the part of too many college and university professors today.

Far too often, professors and administrators alike brush aside student evaluations and reactions as “unreliable,” “unscientific,” “skewed,” “unacceptable,” “invalid,” “sour grapes,” etc. With such labels, evaluations receive little weight, may be dismissed, or not undertaken at all at many institutions of higher learning. For example, in a prestigious southern university, a professor grabbed his testicles in plain view for his class to observe while sitting down in front of them, discussing a lesson on sexual problems. Students immediately reported his behavior to the dean of his college, yet he continues to teach with other unacceptable behaviors frequently in evidence. Historically, no systematic check or evaluation of classroom behavior exists to uncover such practices, except stories regaled by students...usually to one another. While some monitoring of professional behavior has been incorporated among some departments and colleges, tenured faculty experience a “God like” power once they enter the classroom and close the door behind them.

Abuses of classroom power often result from the “unspoken” wars and “turf battle” conflicts in higher education between academic programs and some professors. For example, members of some academic fields seem to perceive themselves as “all knowing,” “esoteric,” “the enlightened,” and “untouchable.” Hence, some of their graduates may perceive themselves as above influence or evaluation by other fields which they consider more trite, banal, ordinary or, in a nutshell, less scholarly. When such graduates of these elite programs or institutions enter the teaching field, they believe they know enough when it comes to teaching. After all, they earned their Ph.D. degree, therefore, giving them expertise in their field. What could they possibly need to know about standing before a class and imparting knowledge to students? Their arrogance, easily perceived by students, limits their ability to hear and accept constructive criticism. Unfortunately, many of these elites practice

the same behavior perpetrated on them by their own professors who served as role models years before. Emulating their former professors by focusing only on subject matter and rarely contemplating teaching methods often generates learning environments in which students experience hostility, distrust, and discomfort.

Commentary

The categories represented in this research represent a composite picture of the esteemed professorate depicted by an accumulation of life experiences, student stories, professorial reputations and caricatures. The categories do not represent exclusivity, and indeed are anticipated to overlap. It is conceivable a professor may fall into several different categories on different days of the week depending on the exigencies of the situation. The professorate needs to strive to use teaching methods which empower students to learn, just as we all strive to encourage the corporate world to empower their employees.

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