

Power and Relationship in On-line Teaching & Learning

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Introduction

In the many roles that I carry out in my life - husband, father, grandfather, teacher, student, consultant and citizen - power is a constant dynamic in my interactions and relationships with others. Sometimes its influence is subtle, sometimes obvious, and occasionally, its impact is blatant. My educational and training work in the area of group dynamics has made me very aware of power and its role in relationships and learning as I have understood them in a face-to-face educational environment (Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Dalton, Hoyle & Watts, 1992; Bales, 1950; Beebe & Masterson, 1994; Deutsch, 1962). And because I teach in a graduate program that emphasizes "power-with" rather than "power over" (Kreisberg, 1992), I constantly struggle with what Oyler (1996) terms "the dimensions of teacher authority."

So as I taught and then reflected on an on-line course, consideration of power and relational issues in this course were a natural extension of my ongoing interest in these social dynamics. Over the past two and a half years, I have had the opportunity to design and carry out several exploratory studies that have analyzed different dimensions of my on-line teaching experience, and to do further reading and writing on this complex topic. In the spring of 2001, I researched the nature of interaction in an on-line course through an analysis and classification both student and instructor text entries in public course areas (Murray, 2000). Subsequently, I explored the relational dimensions of this same course through a qualitative analysis of my course interactions and follow up interviews with a course participant who represented an extreme case (Murray, 2001a). A review of the literature on the nature of power in on-line teaching and learning (Murray, 2001b) allowed me to consider another identified social dimension of this virtual education medium. And finally, a qualitative analysis of Virtual Office Hours student entries and my responses (Murray, 2002) provided an opportunity to integrate the themes of power

and relationship, and consider their mutual and interrelated presence in an on-line course. Subsequent reading related to the social dynamics of power and relationship and their connection to teaching and learning, both in traditional face-to-face educational settings and in an on-line, asynchronous environment, have supported me in clarifying and extending my understanding of the interrelatedness of the social dynamics of power, and relationship in teaching and learning.

If power is defined as a dynamic force that resides in the webbed interactions of teacher and students (Janeway, 1980; Foucault, 1980; Manke, 1997), relationship is defined as "a conscious, sustained human connection created through a dynamic interplay of thoughts and feelings" (Murray, 2001a), and knowledge is defined as human understanding gained practically through description and analysis and constructed socially (Foucault, 1980; Apple, 1982; McLaren, 1997; McNeil, 1986; Oyler, 1996), then on-line courses can be analyzed in an attempt to understand how this triangular structure frames the nature and outcomes of teaching and learning in the virtual classroom.

Building on the questions that Manke (1997) asks as she explores traditional classroom power relations, in this paper I seek to further explore classroom power relations in an on-line, asynchronous environment by asking:

- 1) How can we describe the interaction between power and relationship in the classroom?
- 2) How do these social dynamics manifest themselves in an on-line, asynchronous classroom?
- 3) What is the impact of these mediated social dynamics on teaching and learning on-line?

My discussion will be supported by reference to my earlier research and is framed by critical (Freire, 1970; Apple, 1980, McLaren, 1998, Giroux, 1988; Cuban, 1986; McNeil, 1986, Oyler, 1996), feminist (Janeway, 1982; Noddings, 1984), and post-modern (Habermas, 1971; Foucault, 1980; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) conceptions of these three dimensions.

Structures of Power

My experience of on-line teaching and learning can be understood as a webbed series of power interactions and relationships, and both student learning and my teaching/learning were affected by whether these elements were "at odds" or in "a relation of mutual reinforcement" (Burke, 1954, p. 124).

A few vignettes from the on-line course - *Teachers in Context* - a graduate course I taught through SUNYLink, illustrate "structures of power" at work. When a struggling on-line student in the course e-mailed me that his computer had "crushed," I realized that he was speaking as much about the effects his unreliable computer and inconsistent internet service provider were having on him as he was about the ongoing technical problems he was experiencing with his computer. In my quantitative study of the nature of on-line interaction (Muray 2000), I found no indication of counter-productive behaviors or evidence of overt conflict, yet in a follow-up survey of students' reactions to the course, the presence of interpersonal tension during the course was evident. Considering this data in light of research on classroom discourse (Delpit, 1997; Manke, 1997; McNeil, 1986), I have realized that the on-line discourse had been guided by colluded-on politeness formulas that had masked underlying conflicts. And finally, in reviewing the nature of student questions in the Virtual Office Hours section of my on-line course, I have realized that the vast majority of the entries were not about course content but rather clarifications of or concerns about the point-driven grading system. In light of McNeil's (1986) research on teacher's use of authority, the structure of the course, or form of knowledge, was controlling the type of learning being experienced and the type of knowledge being acquired.

Because my understanding of the interrelationship between power and relationship, it seems productive to briefly deconstruct this relationship to consider how critical, feminist and post-modern theorists conceive of these social dynamics and how they are connected.

The Nature of Power

Through the lenses of critical, feminist and postmodern theory, our understanding and our descriptions of the nature of power, in a broad social context as well as in education specifically, have changed. Modernist conceptions of power (Johnson and Johnson, 2003; Galbraith as cited in Burbules, 1986, Cochran and Ennis, 1997) describe this dynamic in terms of control and as "the ability to influence others, the ability to control what happens to another individual, the control of valuable resources, the capacity to affect another's rewards or costs, and the capacity to affect another's goal accomplishment" (p. 403). These traditional theories view power as the property of an individual or group, used as an instrument to achieve a particular outcome. As Burbules (1986) observes - "Such an approach emphasizes the means of power over the effects" (p. 96). Control, influence, authority, coercion, persuasion, manipulation and resistance all become central power dynamics.

In contrast to a modernist view of power as influence/resistance, many theorists from distinct but complementary perspectives have, over the past 25 years, articulated a relational view of power (Freire, 1970; Apple, 1982; McLaren, 1998; Giroux, 1988; Janeway, 1980; Miller, 1986; Noddings, 1988; Kreisberg, 1992; Foucault, 1998). Foucault's conception of power clearly reflects this dynamic, interactive, process-oriented view. He uses a metaphor - the web - to describe the networked, fluid, and interactive nature of power in a society, organization or group. In commenting on the nature of power, he observes - "Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (p. 98). From this dynamic perspective, dependence, interdependence, consent and agency become more significant than concepts related to influence and control.

A complementary relational view of power is reflected in the feminist writings and critical perspectives of Janeway (1980), Greene (1988), Miller (1986) and Delpit (1995). In *The Power of the Weak*, Janeway extends the consideration of relational power to a

focus on the "othered" - women, people, of color, and people in developing countries. Through dissent, distrust, coming together and resistance, the weak affect interactions of power. Greene and Delpit extend this discussion of the power of the oppressed by focusing on the impact of oppression and marginalization, and the transformation of power relationships. Greene's discussion of resistance and Delpit's articulation of the concepts of "cultures of power" provide a critical framework that informs research on gender, race, ethnicity and class issues, as well as those of electronic technology.

It is apparent that an increasing number of educational researchers are approaching power from this dynamic, relational perspective and analyzing classroom power relationships from this theoretical perspective. (Oyler, 1986; Kreisberg, 1992; McNeil, 1997; Manke, 1997; Tai, 1999, Burniske and Monke, 2001). Their applications of these theories in the classroom will form the foundation for my discussion of the manifestation of these dynamics on-line.

Power and Relationship

If power is a process of human interaction, it takes place between interacting members of relationship. We can name them most simply as "powerful" and "weak," in political terms as "ruler" and "ruled" or "governor" or governed." But the step beyond applying labels isn't easy. What is the nature of these two entities? (Janeway, 1980, p. 1)

Clearly Janeway conceives of power in relational terms. The interactive nature of power that I have identified and discussed is carried out through the "ceaseless shifts of tension" (p. 2) inherent in the dynamic interaction of relationship. While Janeway chooses to focus on macro issues of inequitable power distribution in social relationships and on how the "weak" can redefine this relationship, Miller (1986), Jordan (1999) and Gilligan (1993) have taken a micro focus, exploring the nature of relationships and the personal and interpersonal, as well as social factors that empower and disempower. Issues of voice, autonomy, and resistance become central to this intra and interpersonal process.

Foucault (1980) also recognized the connection between power and relationship: "power is co-existent with the social body" and therefore the dynamics of power and relationship are interwoven (p. 142). Relationships of power take multiple forms and in modern society often reflect the tension between domination and resistance.

In their studies of power dynamics in classrooms, McNeil (1986), Oyler (1996), Manke (1997) and Tai (2001) all recognize the relational dimensions of classroom power and focus on issues of teacher authority. A teacher's approach to power and the strategies that she or he uses to manage the classroom determine both the relationship that he or she has with the students and what they will learn in this setting. A teacher can control both classroom structure and learning content or share authority through co-investigation and co-construction of meaning (Oyler, 1996)

Power, Relationship and Learning - On-line

Throughout the course of my research of on-line teaching and learning, I have been struck by how new this field of inquiry is, how broadly the exploratory questions have been framed, and how few studies have been done specifically on the nature of teacher-student interaction on-line. There are, however, several studies that are worth considering.

How do on-line approaches to teaching and learning impact minority students? Warschauer's (1999) two-year ethnographic study of Internet use in four language-writing classrooms explored the role of the Internet in improving student literacy. Through the use of on-line dialog and cognitive apprenticeships, the classroom teachers that the researcher studied attempted to empower students. Warschauer discovered that an emphasis on dominant cultural norms and language marginalized minority culture students rather than empowered them.

DeVoodg's (1998) study of a multi-ethnic/racial classroom where computer-based small work groups leveraged power sharing between students and the teacher identified several

critical strategies for a relational/interactive approach to power use by teachers. For DeVoodg, this approach involves:

- teacher recognition of his/her own assumptions about appropriate classroom discourse;
- an understanding of the different conventions and expectations governing privileged and marginalized communication styles;
- a willingness to share power; and
- a shift in teaching roles from "commander of the activity to strategic guide."

(p. 3)

Wolfe's (2000) study of ethnic and gender differences in classroom conversational style compares student involvement in face-to-face and computer-mediated discussion. She finds that gender-differentiated patterns apply to White men and women, but not to Hispanic men and women. The researcher's findings refute claims that electronic communication techniques liberate minority and female students by allowing them to speak up and participate more. The study's conclusions call for a change in teacher perceptions about the role of discourse in the classroom - real or virtual - in general, and a clearer understanding of the marginalizing effect of the dominant majority discourse on women and minority culture men and women.

If the empowerment of all students is a central goal of education, as critical and feminist theorists advocate, how can empowerment be accomplished through (or despite, depending on one's critical perspective) electronic technology? Burniske and Monke (2001) articulate this question effectively as they discuss the challenge of designing and facilitating telecollaborative projects with students.

How is computer technology going to help my students develop those inner qualities, such as insight, creativity, and good judgement which education at its best has always sought to inspire? To put it another way, is there a way to harness the power of computer technology to serve my students' search for meaning in their learning and in their lives? (p. 109)

For Burniske and Monke, the collaborative Internet dialogs that they foster among student groups at schools geographically spanning the world promote authentic problem-solving, dialog and collaborations, and enable students to find solutions together that they could not discover alone. The trade off in this approach for perceived fragmentation of curriculum and for jeopardizing teacher authority and control is empowerment.

The focus on relational, power, and social issues apparent in these studies is also reflected in a recent generation of books and edited collections that consider educational computing and on-line communication (Bromley and Apple, 1998; Gordon, 2001; Burbules and Callister, 2000; Solomon, Allen, Resta, 2003). Critical in their approach, all of these are theme-based and address issues of empowerment, gender and race/ethnicity issues and barriers to on-line equity, community building, electronic literacy, and redefining learning in an on-line environment. These authors significantly augment or extend the lines of inquiry being carried out currently by researchers.

Kahn and Friedman (in Bromley and Apple, eds., 1998) emphasize the primacy of human agency in educational computing. As these authors discuss issues of power and control in on-line teaching and learning, and raise concern about the tendency to see computer systems as volitional and intelligent.

We suggest that children and adults in various ways mistakenly attribute agency to computer technology. And we say mistakenly because it is our claim that computers as we conceive of them today in materials and structures do not have agency. Moreover, we suggest that people should control technology, take responsibility for the consequences of computer-mediated action, and minimize if no eliminate control within relations that involve power between people. (p. 162)

As framed by Kahn and Friedman, computer technology itself, does not hold power unless we give it power. This is a helpful clarification in my thinking about the impact of the technology inherent in on-line teaching and learning, and separates issues of mediated communication, which will be addressed subsequently, from those of power and control.

Starkey (in Bromley and Apple, eds., 1998) analyzes the effectiveness of ICONS (International Communication and Negotiation Simulation) in connecting students across cultural divides and poses a central question for educators - "What is the pedagogical value of computers in the classroom?" (p. 177). Starkey finds that this simulation is effective in promoting between team interaction among peers via computer network, with-in team interaction and co-construction of messages, and individual processing and cognitive restructuring. Significantly, she emphasizes that learning is accomplished by the teachers' willingness to relinquish some of the control that they traditionally exercise. The interrelationship between power, relationship and knowledge is clearly evident here.

It is also interesting to consider how the current generation of textbooks on on-line communication is addressing issues of power, relationship and knowledge. *On-line Communication: Linking Technology, Identity and Culture* (Wood and Smith, 2001) provides a typical example. Though more modernist in approach, Wood and Smith do consider dimensions of these themes, examining emerging theories and research findings, and adding concepts and tools for my exploration.

Acknowledging that computer-mediated communication is distinct and shaped by electronic technologies, Wood and Smith (2001) consider the effect of computers and computer networks on directness of communication (presence) and how these technologies mediate our understanding of self, society and reality. Like Foucault (1980) they raise questions that are critical to my study - "What kind of academic community emerges if most of your interactions with (others) are mediated in some way? On a larger level, what kind of culture arises from a mediated society?" (p. 6).

Wood and Smith's (2001) discussion of social presence theory (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976), social context cues theory (Sproul and Kessler, 1986) and the social identification/ deindividuation (SIDE) model (Posthumes, Spear and Lea, 1988) all support the approach I used in my study of the nature of interaction in on-line teaching and learning (Murray, 2000), affirming that:

- 1) In researching on-line communication, we need to attend to both task and socially-oriented (maintenance) behaviors;
- 2) One's self, in an on-line environment, is conveyed and recognized through textual behaviors; and
- 3) Individual perception, rather than the qualities of the mediating communication media, is the dominant factor in communication.

As I seek to identify the impact of computer-mediated interactions in teaching and learning, these concepts and tools will prove invaluable.

How do the dynamics of power and relationship manifest themselves in an on-line course? The results of the studies I have identified and discussed and the text I have briefly reviewed begin illustrate these dynamics at work in the virtual class room. They also generate a set of common questions framed by this triangular structure.

These questions include:

- 4) How do teachers' approaches to classroom discourse affect student learning?
- 5) How can power be shared with students?
- 6) How does an emphasis on dominant cultural norms and language marginalize minority students?
- 7) How can we support students in developing inner qualities of insight, creativity and good judgement?
- 8) How can we promote authentic problem solving, dialog and collaboration in the classroom?

Stating these questions in broad terms, beyond the context of an on-line course, it is apparent that from critical, feminist and post-modern perspectives, that are questions that need to be addressed in any educational setting. As I have looked for conceptual frameworks and tools to support an analysis of on-line courses through my triangular structure, I have realized that I need to review both on-line research and research based in face-to-face classroom interaction. I contend that both sources provide relevant and productive tools for the analysis of the on-line asynchronous classroom.

From 1986 to 1999, a group of educational researchers focused on power relations in the classroom (McNeil, 1986; Delpit, 1996; Oyler, 1996; Manke, 1997; Tai, 1999). Through a series of ethnographic studies they have explored the nature of power and control in teacher-student relationships. Though the setting for all of these studies is the traditional, face-to-face classroom, their shared understanding of the connections between power, relationship and knowledge, their research methodologies, and the dimensions of power and relationship in the classroom they have identified, are all relevant and, I feel, applicable to the on-line educational environment.

Writing from a critical perspective, McNeil (1986) explores how organizational forms of schooling mediate and transform knowledge that becomes accessible to students. Using extended classroom observations and follow-up interviews, she analyzes teacher/student and teacher/administrator interactions and finds that teacher choices related curriculum and learning are related to power structures internal to the institution - that knowledge forms control what is considered "school knowledge" and what students learn. To resolve these "contradictions of control," (p. 209) McNeil calls for a transformation of teacher-student relationships in which students will have access to knowledge about their world and a safe, supportive environment to explore it. Students will need to "participate in their own de-schooling" (p.215).

Delpit's (1995) influential article, "The Silenced Dialog: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other Peoples' Children," adds significantly to educators' continued exploration of the dynamics of power inherent in classroom interaction. Focusing on approaches to literacy in working with children, Delpit identifies and explores "codes of power" represented in "standard edited English" (p. xvi). Delpit finds that by not hearing the voices of people of color in the classroom, academics and classroom teachers are silencing these voices. The identification of this silencing has provided educators with a critical tool for deconstructing, analyzing and understanding the impact of classroom discourse.

Delpit's conceptualization of cultures of power also contributes to the tools and frameworks I need to apply in analyzing on-line classroom discourse. How do we transfer her understanding of the codes of power for classroom participation and the need for those with less power to acquire understanding and access to these codes to the on-line educational environment?

Though the on-line studies cited in this paper (DeVoodg, 1998; Warschauer, 1999, Wolfe, 2000) that focus on on-line instructional approaches and how they affect students of color don't reference Delpit's work, their research intentions and their conclusions are similar and mutually supportive.

Building on Delpit's work and articulating conceptions of power and relationship that are based explicitly on the work of Foucault (1980) and Janeway (1980), Manke (1997) also focuses on classroom power relations through an exploration of student - teacher interaction. The researcher contends that both students and the teacher have "interactional resources" (p. 11) related to power. Through a microethnographic approach, Manke explores how both students and teachers use these resources as they interact in relations of power. In response to the power dynamics the researcher finds at work in the classroom, she advocates an "interactive constructivist" view of power. Manke's attention to specific "interactional resources related to power" (p. 11) and their impact in the classroom when utilized are significant tools and concepts and will be addressed in more detail at the close of the section.

Teachers sharing authority in the classroom and how students utilize, contest or reject this authority sharing is the focus of Oyler's (1996) ethnographic study of a diverse urban high school. Oyler builds on earlier studies that have established the power relations that exist in the classroom, grounding the co-investigative and co-constructive approach she advocates in the work of Dewey (1938), Foucault (1980), Giroux and McLaren (1986). Through dialogic data analysis done in collaboration with a classroom teacher, she analyzes the challenges inherent in implementing a new literacy approach that is based in a co-construction of knowledge and shared authority. In documenting and analyzing

students' varied responses to shared authority, she contributes a significant dimension to this critical research theme.

From a feminist perspective, teachers' use of power in classroom interactions includes critical consideration of issues of justice and caring (Noddings, 1984) and strength and vulnerability (Miller, Gilligan, 1982). "These are not necessarily conflicts of interest between individuals, between students and teachers, but often a conflict within individual's own processes of making sense of their identities in relation to others and to their host institution" (Burbules as cited in Tai, 1999, p. 986). Tai's study of the nature of power interactions in the college classroom addresses unique and power issues in teacher/student interaction that complements other research I have reviewed. Her focus on paradox as an important element in understanding the nature of student/teacher interactions and on the importance of self-knowledge in relation to how one responds to power are unique contributions to research on teacher/student power relations.

Emerging Tools and Concepts

As I have discussed current studies of student-teacher classroom power relations - on-line and face-to-face, I have not only considered how power and relationship manifest themselves in the classroom - virtual and face-to-face, I have identified some important concepts and tools:

- 1) As stated by Oyler (1996) and affirmed by the methodologies of the other researchers discussed, teacher/student classroom discourse can be analyzed. "A major premise of this study is that classroom discourse can be analyzed to show how authority is being established, maintained and negotiated" (Oyler, p. 5). In analyzing on-line discourse, we need to acknowledge the limitations of computer-mediated communication (Wood and Smith, 2001), but discourse analysis is a viable research tool in this virtual context.
- 2) Particularly in McNeil's (1986), Delpit's (1995), and Manke's (1997) work there are interactional strategies that can be identified and analyzed as cues or markers for power and relational behaviors.

It is my contention that discourse analysis and interactional strategy analysis provide viable research tools for critically analyzing on-line courses. To support this contention I will apply them in analyzing data from the on-line course - *Teachers in Context*. But before moving to this consideration of the impact of the mediated social dynamics of power and relationship on on-line teaching and learning and applying these tools, it is important to briefly discuss these interactional strategies.

In framing their research methodologies, McNeil (1986), Delpit (1995), Oyler (1996) and Manke (1997) identify and apply strategies used in classroom interactions to achieve various purposes and that embody student and teacher construction of power. These include:

- Organization of time and space (Manke, 1997) - Time and space arrangements in the classroom can be understood as aspects of classroom management, and include not only the physical classroom arrangements and structuring of the day, but choices made about curriculum and instruction (Oyler, 1996). From this perspective, design of activities can:
 - a) control visibility of teacher contributions to power
 - b) control student contributions to classroom knowledge construction
 - c) control student interactions with each other
 - d) control responses
 - e) control interaction with materials
 - f) establish and consistently maintain rules.
- Indirect discourse strategies (Manke, 1997) - Building on the work of Brown and Levinson (as cited in Manke) and Mishler (as cited in Manke), the author identifies discourse strategies intended to avoid confrontations and maintain at least the perception of cooperation. These strategies include indirect speech acts, particularly politeness formulas.
- Defining classroom knowledge (McNeil, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Oyler, 1996; Manke, 1997) - The questions posed by Manke in her study characterize central points of inquiry in studies by all four of these researchers: "What counts as classroom knowledge? What do students contribute to what counts as classroom knowledge?"

What is the relationship between classroom control of knowledge and student learning?" (p. 92). A focus on who defines "school knowledge" and to what degree students are involved in negotiating for and contributing to the content of instruction can provide insights into this dimension of classroom power.

- Students' Interactive Contributions to the Classroom (McNeil, 1986; Oyler, 1996; Manke, 1997) - How do students exert power in the classroom? McNeil, Oyler and Manke all identify student actions that conflict with teacher agendas. As Oyler discusses teacher attempts to share authority in the classroom, she also notes how students react by utilizing, contesting, or rejecting this authority sharing. Ironically, McNeil has found that students sometimes react to authority sharing by acquiescing to the process but disbelieving the knowledge being shared. In her study of three elementary classrooms, Manke finds that students exert power by:
 - a) limiting their responses
 - b) rejecting teacher assumptions
 - c) assuming roles that conflict with teacher expectations
 - d) assuming the teacher's role
 - e) making the teacher's control visible and contesting it

The constructs discussed in this section can support us in exploring the impact of the power and relationship in online teaching and learning. Through the identification and analysis of text-based discourse in an on-line course intended to avoid confrontations and maintain at least the perception of cooperation, and the identification of teacher and student behaviors that attempt to control virtual classroom time and space, define course knowledge, or share, use, contest or reject authority, we can make these dynamics visible and consider how they affect teaching and learning.

How are students and teachers affected by the dynamics of power and relationship in an on-line course?

As identified in my introduction, my experience of teaching an on-line graduate course in the Fall of 2001 and my subsequent exploratory research have provided multiple perspectives on the nature of teacher/student interactions, as well as on the relational and

power dimensions of this course. This research has also provided a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data from which to draw as I illustrate the impact of power and relationship on teaching and learning in this course. I will frame my discussion around the interactional strategies identified in the previous section.

Organization of Time and Space

As a course taught through the SUNYLink Learning Network of the State University of New York, this course was designed and organized using a Lotus Notes template and accessed by students through the World Wide Web. The course was authored by a professor at the university and has been taught by several instructors.

This course is highly structured, containing five two-week modules each focusing on a theme that explores a social dimension of teaching. Within each module, there are multiple assignments including:

- an assigned text to read
- notes on the text to be written, submitted and reviewed
- a threaded discussion with focus questions that is reviewed and graded by the instructor
- a paper written in response to the text that is reviewed and graded by the instructor.

A point system is used for the evaluation of all assignments and a cumulative point total determines student grades. Instructor expectations of student performance and behavior are clearly outlined and cover all aspects of the course.

As with many aspects of this course, a consideration of issues of control is a complex task. It is evident that the virtual classroom time and space, as well as the course content, are highly controlled, with no room for negotiation of course structure and deadlines, and little room for choice in content. The impact of this degree of control is apparent in the Virtual Office entries. Student learning is often driven by the deadlines and the focus of their questions in my "Virtual Office" frequently centers around the grading system. The following excerpts from students' questions and comments in the Virtual Office illustrate

the degree to which student learning and student behavior has been controlled by these course elements:

Subject: Notes deadline

Dear professor,

I did not realize that deadlines needed prior approval from you until just now when I read the Bulletin Board. I thought from the notes about the course that two deadlines were excused with a legitimate reason. I did not realize I needed prior approval. I hope that you can consider this for I worked very hard on the notes for Module 1. I did not realize that I needed prior approval.

Martha

PS Please let me know.

Subject: E-mail deadline response

Dear professor,

I am very grateful that you accepted my late work. I read the guidelines and did not realize we needed prior approval. Now I know. I don't plan on having to the deadline again. I was worried the last day about this. Thank you for being a considerate professor.

Martha

Subject: missing grades

I noticed that the process for grades has changed. In the beginning you posted that each discussion was going to be assigned a value of 10 points, with an additional 10 points for argumentation that would equal a possible 60 points. However, the three discussions you are evaluating only add up to 49.5 points. What happened to the rest? Are we only being evaluated out of 289.5 points instead of 300? Also, I never received points for my personal profile (10) or module 4 notes (15). Can you please post my grades for those two assignments? Thank you.

Jolene

In contrast to this initial perspective on control issues in the organization of time and space; some course participants appreciated this degree of control and the conveniences they felt is inherent in distance learning. Responses from a follow-up student survey illustrate this:

What would you characterize as strengths of the course?

- The organization! I always knew what was expected with no hidden surprises. There was adequate time to complete the assignments.
- Convenience of being at home, interaction with others from various districts.
- If I was unable to go to the Albany campus, one advantage of this course would be the ability to take a course and not have to go to campus.
- Schedule can easily fit time schedule of student
- Was able to use personal time schedule

Students' control of time and the efficiency of taking an on-line course are often cited as benefits of this approach. Bryson and DeCastell (1998) characterize this rationale for educational computing as consistent with a technicist/modernist approach to computer use that supports human adaptation to the demands of progress toward a technical society. The fall 2000 SUNYLink catalog highlights student testimonials that emphasize control and efficiency as benefits: "I am married, and I am employed full-time. With everything that I already have going on in my life, the SLN made it practical for me to pursue my degree and still balance everything else;" "...Flexibility in a complex world - that's what SLN creates for diligent, self-motivated students." (emphasis is mine)

Indirect Discourse Strategies

McNeil (1986) describes agreed-upon or colluded-on patterns of interaction between teachers and students as "negotiations of efficiencies" (p. 160). In balancing risks taken versus rewards offered in relation to the potential for classroom disorder, dissent or conflict, teachers and students often strike explicit or implied agreements about the nature of the discourse in the classroom. Manke (1997) and others (Mishler as cited in Manke; Delpt, 1988) describe these discourse patterns in terms of indirect discourse, and particularly politeness formulas. Especially when working with adults, but also in situations where classroom management is perceived as a problem, teachers, in attempt to minimize overt signs of their authority and minimize the potential for conflict, use these strategies. Instead of stating explicitly or telling directly what they want, teachers often use the following strategies:

- Using speech acts whose surface meaning is not the same as their meaning in the interaction;
- Placing themselves with the class, rather than underlining their status as a teacher, by using the pronoun "we;"
- Praising desired behavior rather than criticizing undesired behavior;
- Stating general principles of behavior rather than identifying specific incidents;
- Correcting student behaviors unobtrusively; and
- Offering choices to students that have been pre-selected by the instructor (Manke, p. 77).

A review of my entries in the on-line course dialog indicates a consistent pattern of indirect discourse in responding to students:

From the Virtual Office:

I encourage you to continue to support your statements and to use authoritative sources in addition to examples and references to classmates.

Martha, just a reminder that I have not received the remainder of your notes. I encourage you to complete the remainder of the assignments ASAP; unfortunately, you are losing more credits as each day passes.

I can relate to your venting. Computers are a mixed blessing.

From the public Bulletin Board

Subject: Course Notes 9/4

Though we won't be meeting in a classroom this first week of the course, there are lots of signs that the course has begun. Several of you have submitted Student Profiles and Tony has submitted the first discussion topic. Thanks for getting the ball rolling.

You have probably noticed that I have closed all of the assignment modules except module one. I'll be opening modules as we near the end of the time assigned for the module we are presently working on.

There should be several additional students joining us; we'll welcome them as they arrive. Here's to a great semester!

Subject: Guidelines for Late Work

Here's a clarification on the course's allowances for late work. As stated in the Expectations & Guidelines section, two assignments will be accepted late with a "legitimate reason." I would like to clarify this by adding that I need to know IN ADVANCE of the due date that you are not going to make a deadline. I trust you to use this option with discretion and don't need to know the reason. Our lives are all complicated and things happen that delay our best intentions. In general, I can be more supportive if I am alerted in advance or as soon as possible of problems that hinder your progress in the course. It is easier for me to be responsive than reactive.

In response to the discourse patterns that I established from the onset, even students who were having extreme difficulties in the course maintained these politeness formulas:

Subject: Oh, my god!

I just realized that I am a week off. I thought that the discussion and paper were due the first week of December! I am so sorry! What can I do about this? I feel terrible. I thought the book was due last Monday, then the paper and discussion were next week. It seems I was wrong though. I'm really sorry. How can I make this up?

Subject: My paper

I just received my grade, and I must admit that I am upset. Is there anything I can do to boost my grade on this assignment? Can I redo the paper noting what you pointed out? ...If not, I understand, but I thought I would ask because I want to do my best in this class.

It is apparent from this sampling that the nature of the discourse in this course was civil and controlled, yet positive and productive. In addition to my consistent use of indirect discourse and politeness formulas, my study of the nature of teacher-student interactions in this course (Murray, 2001) identifies another consistent pattern in my behavior that has contributed to course control, yet has not been identified by students as controlling and manipulative. As Wood and Smith (2001) observe, in promoting effective on-line communication it is important to support both task-oriented and socially-oriented behaviors and interactions by participants. Traditional theorists (Johnson and Johnson, 2003; Bales, 1950) have recognized the importance of attending to both task and maintenance (social) behaviors in group development. In monitoring the frequency of my own maintenance behaviors in the first and last modules of this course, I noted that 28% of my entries in Module 1 and 40% of my entries in Module 5 were maintenance-oriented. Expressing support and acceptance, observing and commenting on process and acknowledging and appreciating others' contribution were my primary maintenance behaviors. Given the lack of non-productive or counterproductive behaviors during the

course and the positive and productive student outcomes, it is apparent that these indirect discourse strategies functioned to control the course and support positive relational interaction.

Defining Classroom Knowledge

In the on-line graduate course - *Teachers in Context* - what counted as classroom knowledge, and how did students contribute to what counts as classroom knowledge? Despite the highly prescriptive nature of the course format, assignments and grading, it was apparent the inclusion of a threaded discussion in each module supported students in making sense of the module content, clarify their understanding, share opinions and reactions, respond to others, and summarize their learning. Sample entries from two of these discussions reflect this learning:

Subject: Sum up

I like this discussion because it has made me really consider the many pieces that go into making an ethical judgment... It's also made me think about how to define my own values, so ultimately I can judge what kind of "fit" I will be for school districts I may work in the future.

Subject: Closing Comments

This was the first time I have been exposed to ethics. I took some thought and a lot of reading to get a grasp of how ethics are different from morals. I would have grouped the two as being the same before this module... It's something that we hear about often and I will make use of the terminology in my life. It has sparked discussion in my personal life and I enjoyed the class discussion as well.

Subject: Final comments

The examples presented throughout the discussions were very enlightening.
BRING ON MODULE 4!!!!!!

Subject: Final comments

I have found the postings on the distribution of the various levels of government control in education policy interesting, however, most remarkable to me is our pre-supposed acceptance of government control over the school system. In light of the problems of public schools I think it is time to really objectively evaluate whether alternatives to the current government-run monopoly system have merit.

Subject: Final Posting

Wow, this was a great way to end this course. The book "Lessons from Abroad" was excellent and certainly challenged much of my personal dogma on what types of changes are required to improve the total education picture. One thing McAdams and I agree on is this: it is going to take more than just tinkering with the current system to get where we need to be. McAdams calls for a '...nothing less than a cultural revolution".

These sample discussion entries reflect learner engagement and expanded understanding of course knowledge, with little evidence of dissatisfaction, resistance, or acquiescence but disbelief. It is significant that despite other philosophical and pedagogical concerns about the efficacy of on-line teaching and learning, the majority of professors that I have discussed this with have been impressed with the quality of on-line course discussions. Dr. Karen Swan, a professor with a long history of involvement with electronic technology and distance education articulates this support:

What impresses me most about my online courses is the quality of the discussions. Not only does everyone have a voice, but everyone has something to say. Online students seem more diverse than traditional students and have a variety of perspectives they bring to bear on issues enriches us all. Educators talk a lot about the social construction of knowledge; in online discussion, you can actually see it happening (as cited in SUNY, 200, p. 4).

In light of Dr. Swan's claims, I will leave the question of whether or not on-line discussion engenders the constructivist principles advocated by the researchers discussed in this paper for my final consideration of critical themes.

Students' Interactive Contributions to the Classroom

If, as Foucault (1980) observes, power is a dynamic, interactive process and it is not held by one individual or group, but circulates in group networks, then students as well as the instructor have power. McNeil (1986), Delpit (1995), Oyler (1996), Manke (1997), and Tai (1999) all assert that students exercise power through their reactions to teacher behaviors and classroom/course structures.

As I have indicated, in my experience of teaching an on-line course there were not identifiable instances of resistance, limiting, confronting or contesting - of course requirements and structures, my roles and interactions, or of each other's ideas and opinions. Whether or not this lack of conflict around ideas and opinions helped or hindered the course's quality and ultimate effectiveness in promoting student learning is difficult to assess from the data gathered, but is worth investigating in future studies.

What is apparent is that some students in this on-line course did exert power in more subtle ways - through withdrawal, negotiation, and eliciting sympathy and compromise. There were several instances during the course where students were "absent" for extended periods of time and I was compelled to "seek them out" and attend to their needs. The following Virtual Office entries illustrate this behavior:

Subject: Checking In

Solomon, I've noticed that you are beginning to fall behind and want to touch base. I still have only partial notes for module 1 and have not yet received the module 1 paper yet.

Also module 2 notes were due yesterday. What's preventing you from staying current? Please let me know what your course status is. Thanks.

TM

Subject: Course assignments

Dear Mr. Murray,

I have been having technical difficulties in sending my responses to the various assignments, and I have been trying fervently in working with the Help Desk to resolve this.

Solomon

Subject: Module One Discussion

Jolene,

I spent some time today logging discussion entries for Module One and noticed that as of 9/29, you have not participated. I am concerned that you have not engaged in this class interaction and would like to hear from you through the Virtual Office.

Subject: Discussion Points

Professor Murray,

I finally found the office! I was looking for this place for the longest time. I see that you have been trying to correspond with me. I'm sorry for the lack of communication on my part.

Jolene

In some instances, students attempted to negotiate extensions or concessions related to course requirements. Again, sample entries illustrate these power behaviors:

Subject: Question

As per my last letter, I affirmed my view to go forth with getting the outstanding assignments in by the 18th of December which is Monday.

My question - if I am not able to get everything by that date, which happens to be the official closing date of the course, can I be offered an extension. Well, it might be pushing my luck, but I have to ask anyway.

If there is, what final option do I have?

Solomon

Subject: Assignment

Professor Murray,

I am about half way through the assignment on book notes. Can I still submit this even though it is late? I am a new faculty member at Upstate Medical University and was a late registrant.

Robert

Subject: Assignment

Robert,

Absolutely, I want you to complete and submit the assignment. I know that you are a late registrant and trying to catch up. The due dates are important, but summarizing your understanding of the book and analyzing the stories in light of the four themes assigned is more important. I'll look forward to reviewing your notes.

Finally, students frequently shared personal problems that were preventing them from meeting course requirements and deadlines, and obviously seeking sympathy and flexibility on my part:

Subject: We missed you

Tony, in logging the entries for the Module Four discussion, I noted that you did not participate at all. Is everything okay? This is not typical of your participation in this course.

Subject: Why I Was Missing

Dear Professor,

I have not been able to participate as I would have wanted because of two problems. First, my daughter who has the computer in her room decided to re-do her room, wallpaper and all, and she has put the computer in the attic. I did

not have the computer at home until today. Also, another daughter of mine who recently married is having a very difficult marriage. This personal problem has caused a cross in our family. We are all working through it.... I will keep going as best I can.

Tony

Subject: Extension Requested

Prof. Murray, I have been sick the last few days and have been trying to finish the notes but have been unable. I will try to submit them in a few days. I thought I could do it on time but cannot so I am asking for an extension.

Martha

The reactions of graduate students in a current Qualitative Research Methods course who reviewed and commented on my responses to these students' emotional requests embedded in these course entries have been informative and provocative. Initially, these graduate students felt that I had been too "soft" with these students. When I responded by indicating that these types of requests were frequent and typical of all my course experiences, including their research class, many of the students reddened in recognition of their own behaviors and personal requests for concessions. When teacher/student power interactions are made visible, as they are in a text-based on-line course, the instructor and students are challenged to consider their individual power actions and responses. As acknowledged earlier in this paper, I constantly struggle with what Oyler (1996) terms "the dimensions of teacher authority." It is an ongoing challenge for me to define in behavioral terms what it means to use "power with" (Kriesberg, 1992).

Conclusions: So What?

This paper has been an attempt to synthesize and clarify my understanding of the dynamics of power and relationship in on-line teaching and learning. In reviewing and drawing on my previous research, and supporting my understanding through a broader review of the literature on these dynamics in both on-line and face-to-face classroom, I have developed clearer, more informed answers to my exploratory questions.

How can we describe the interaction between power and relationship in the classroom? I've found that these social dynamics are intimately and inextricably interconnected, and as Burke (1945) observes, "in social organization, they are necessarily somewhat at odds" (p. 124). It is impossible to consider either of these dynamics independently, for each has an implication for the nature of the others. As this paper illustrates, in an educational context, what is learned by students and the nature of the relationship between the teacher and students, and among students, are both determined by how power is understood and used in the setting. The dominance of power in this structure is troublesome and sobering, because as this paper also illustrates, power is pervasive, and often misunderstood and misused. "There is a sense in which powers are everywhere" (Burke, p. 117).

How do these social dynamics manifest themselves in an on-line, asynchronous classroom? Drawing on research and theoretical writing that focuses on both on-line classrooms and traditional face-to-face classrooms, it is apparent that the nature of any classroom can be understood and described in terms of the interrelated dynamics of power and relationship. Teacher's choices, actions and interactions and student's responses, actions and interactions all determine what will be learned, how it will be valued, and the nature of the relationships in the classroom.

Significantly, this paper has shown, at least as a testable hypotheses, that the interconnected social dynamics of power and relationship can be identified and considered through the analysis of computer-mediated discourse and the analysis on on-line behaviors and interactions. The interactive strategies discussed and applied in this paper have been successfully tested and developed in a number of recent qualitative studies of traditional face-to-face classrooms (McNeil, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Oyler, 1996; Tai, 1999), and can, with a recognition of the mediating effects of on-line communication (Wood and Smith, 2001) be appropriately and effectively applied in analyzing an on-line asynchronous course.

What is the impact of these mediated social dynamics on teaching and learning on-line? My conclusions here are tentative, based solely on my exploratory studies and the application of research approaches developed in face-to-face classrooms. Through this paper, I have further analyzed my experience as an instructor of an on-line course and have found that the mediating effect of communicating in an on-line asynchronous environment and the choices made around course and knowledge structuring have had a significant effect on teaching and learning, and on course interactions. These factors affect what is taught and how it is taught, what is learned, and determine the nature of the relationship between the instructor and students and among students.

"Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). It strikes me that Foucault's description of power here is very appropriate in the describing the web-based classroom. As this paper illustrates, power is evident in on-line course interactions, in the software designer's construction of the interface, in the course author's decisions about structure and content, in the instructor's comments and virtual actions, and in student's reactions, responses, and interactions.

In a paper that explored the relational dimension of my interactions with a student in my on-line courses, I developed a definition of relationship - "a conscious, sustained human connection created through a dynamic interplay of thoughts and feelings" (Murray, 2001a). My experience and subsequent analysis of my interactions with students in this course affirms that relationships are possible, and from my humanistic/ multicultural perspective desirable, in an on-line classroom. What I have further discovered through this paper is that, to a large degree, how power is handled in a relationship determines its nature. In an on-line educational setting, it is apparent that relationship in this environment can be fostered through the course structure or despite it. Even in a course where "classroom" space and time are tightly controlled, teacher and student actions and interactions can foster positive relationships.

Knowledge is socially-constructed - this contemporary understanding of cognitive development is supported by the majority of the authors whose works I reviewed (Kahn and Friedman, 1998; Foucault, 1980; Tai, 1999; McNeil, 1986; Oyler, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Manke, 1997). And because knowledge is constructed in interactions with others, there is a danger that what is considered "the truth" or "official knowledge" will be determined by those who have dominance in a society (Delpit). Within this social context, low power group members are often left out of dialog and required to accept a world view framed by the dominant culture (Delpit). Understanding knowledge in this context, on-line education is challenged respond critically and equitably. Several of the authors reviewed advocate what Manke terms "an interactive constructivist approach" (p. 126). Kahn and Friedman (1998) identify the characteristics of this approach to teaching and learning, and in light of the tendency for control in on-line education, strongly advocate a constructivist approach as a necessary power/relationship/knowledge response. These characteristics include:

- promoting active, original thinking through experimentation and problem-solving
- building curriculum on student interests and extending their interests through exploration
- developing student autonomy that is highly social, where "the social bounds the individual and vice-versa" (p. 165).
- Supporting collaboration that develop peer relationships and supports equality, justice and democracy.

Clearly these are ambitious goals that challenge on-line educators to move beyond an understanding of socially-constructed knowledge as only dialogic interaction.

Embedded in this description of a constructivist approach is the triangular structure of power, relationship, and knowledge. In this approach they seem balanced and mutually supportive; they speak to what is possible in an on-line classroom. In considering the potential of this approach, I am drawn back to Burke's (1945) observations about the three social ideals: love, knowledge and authority. Though Burke recognizes that socially they are often at odds, he too dreams of the possible - ..."But in moments of exaltation, ideally, we may think of them as a trinity, standing one to another in a relation of mutual

reinforcement" (p. 124). This is, I think, the relation we need to strive for in on-line education.

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