

# **POWER IN THE CLASSROOM**

**Communication, Control, and Concern**

**Edited by**

**Virginia P. Richmond  
James C. McCroskey**

**POWER IN THE  
CLASSROOM:**  
**Communication, Control,  
and Concern**

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**Virginia P. Richmond**  
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1992

**LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS**  
**Hillsdale, New Jersey** **Hove and London**

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Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers  
365 Broadway  
Hillsdale, New Jersey 07642

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Power in the classroom : communication, control, and concern / edited by Virginia P. Richmond, James C. McCroskey.

p. cm. — (Communication)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8058-1027-7

1. Teacher-student relationships—United States. 2. Classroom management—United States. I. Richmond, Virginia P., 1936– . II. McCroskey, James C. III. Series: Communication (Hillsdale, N.J.)

LB1033.P69 1992

371.1'023'0973—dc20

91-31734

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Preface

Research relating to communication in the classroom has been reported in the education literature for most of the past century. In contrast, the field of communication has begun to direct serious attention to classroom communication only in the past two decades. This is not to say that people in communication have been disinterested in education. To the contrary, the field of speech, from which most of the current people in communication emerged, was from its earliest days centrally concerned with teaching. For the most part, however, speech was interested in teaching in the same way that chemistry was interested in teaching. They both sought to learn how they might better teach their own subject matter.

It was not until the early 1970s that a significant number of people in the field of communication began to look at the process of instruction as a manifestation of applied communication. They saw teaching as communication, and much of pedagogical theory as applied communication theory. Although most of these people also were interested in the teaching of speech (speech education) or the teaching of communication (communication education), they considered one of their primary research concerns to be the investigation of communication in the instructional environment.

Many of these people have come to consider themselves specialists in "instructional communication." This subspecialty attained validation when it was accepted as the seventh Division of the International Communication Association. It should be stressed that this scholarly interest should not be confused with the interest in the use of audio-visual materials in instruction.

People with such interests are sometimes considered to be in “instructional communications.” The focus of the field of study to which we are referring is the human communication process, particularly as it applies to the interaction between students and teachers.

A primary concern of people in instructional communication is the communication behavior of teachers and students in instructional environments. It is taken as a given that learning is the primary desired outcome of instructional interactions. Thus, the focus of inquiry is the communicative behaviors of teachers and students that enhance or detract from learning.

The editors of this book, as well as most of the authors, have spent many years teaching in-service and/or pre-service teachers what we know about the human communication process. Teachers make good students. They are motivated to learn and improve. But they are also demanding students. They want ideas that work. They claim that they do not want “theory,” but if they are shown how something will improve their teaching and then told why, they are very open to that new (unlabeled) theory.

A very high proportion of the in-service teachers with whom we have worked are less than complimentary about their undergraduate teacher education. They report that they were taught a lot of subject matter content (history, English, math, etc.) and education theory but graduated from college without a clue as to how to really go about teaching live students. When we explain basic communication principles to them and apply the ideas to teaching, they very often ask openly why they were not taught such things as undergraduates. The answer, of course, is that there still are relatively few specialists in instructional communication, and this subfield of communication is not well known in the field of education.

Working with teachers as students is very challenging. New questions are raised by them continually, many of which we have been unable to answer. Over the years the most common concern that teachers have raised in our classes is how they can establish and maintain discipline so that they can teach rather than attend constantly to disciplinary matters. Teachers often express the view that they are powerless in their own classrooms. Students are undisciplined, there is no parental support, administrators are cowards or unconcerned, and so on.

Clearly, power is a critical issue in the classroom. That is why an entire research program was launched, and continues today, with the goal of understanding power in this environment and how communication and power interact. We learned very quickly that power is not something that one person (teacher) has over the other persons (students) in the classroom. Rather, power is something that is negotiated by participants in the instructional process. And when instruction is at its best, questions of power fade into oblivion. When instruction is at its worst, the battle for power becomes central.

This book looks at power and instruction in many different ways. It draws generally from the lessons of the social sciences. It looks at research that has been conducted by many instructional communication specialists. It looks at new approaches to power. It presents a status report on what we know now, or at least think we do, and points to many divergent directions that offer opportunities for future scholarship. It does not pretend to bring together all that is now known about the role of communication in instruction. It does attempt to look at one slice of that area of knowledge in depth.

*V.P.R.*

*J.C.M.*

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# CHAPTER 1

## Power and Control: Social Science Perspectives

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*The meaning and implication of power has been both a fascinating and mysterious topic of discussion for thousands of years. Mysterious, very largely because people have never truly understood what power is, where it comes from, and how it works.*

—Lawless, 1972, p. 230

The subject of power, of interest to people for millenia, has been on the social science agenda for at least the last 100 years. George Simmel, the father of American sociology, suggested in the late 1800s that the exercise of power among people was a central issue deserving of study and understanding (Simmel, 1896). Russell (1938) wrote of power as the fundamental concept in social science, “in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics” (p. 10). Lewin felt that “Not the least service which social research can do for society is to attain better insight into the legitimate and non-legitimate aspects of power” (Marrow, 1969, p. 172). Mannheim (1950) argued that “Power is present whenever and wherever social pressures operate on the individual to induce desired conduct” (p. 46). Kornhauser (1957) wrote of “one most important—and in my judgment greatly under-emphasized—aspect of the relations of social science to society, namely, questions of social science in the context of the power structure” (p. 187). Writers from sociology, psychology, communication, management, politics, organizational behavior, and other disciplines have

continued to stress the centrality of power to any explanation of the human experience.

For all that effort, the first, and perhaps most obvious, conclusion one draws from an attempt to review the subject is that there is a consistent lack of agreement about the nature and parameters of social power and influence. According to Pfeffer (1982), "Power is one of the more controversial of the social science concepts" (p. 64). Perrow (1970) concluded that the subject was clearly "the messiest problem of all" (p. ix).

### DEFINITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Definitions of *power* tend to be of several types. Some (e.g., Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) think of power solely in terms of the control of resources. Those who are so placed as to be able to mediate the flow of rewards, raw materials, and so forth, have power, whereas those who are dependent on the resources thus mediated are powerless.

Another approach to power focuses on the position held by a person seeking to exercise power. Power is thus equated, or at least intimately associated, with one's formal authority in an organization or a society (see, e.g., Hodgkinson & Meeth, 1971).

The ability to mediate the flow of resources to those who are dependent may, in some instances, be associated with the position one holds, but this is by no means always the case. The two perspectives are certainly not isomorphic. It is also worth noting that both the resource dependency and position perspectives are seen by many writers as being subsets of power, but not as its central and defining characteristics.

Hartnett (1971) argued that there are important distinctions between authority and influence, with influence carrying connotations of informal procedures involving persuasion, whereas authority, the power vested in an office or role, consists of giving orders through formal channels. According to Hartnett, "Power needs no institutional sanction" (p. 27). This point of view is consistent with the writings of Kotter (1985) and Raven (1965).

Still another, and apparently more influential, way to conceptualize power is to describe different ways in which it can operate. Whereas both the resource dependency model and authority of position approach treat power as being essentially unitary in nature, many find it more realistic to treat power as a complex phenomenon with multiple manifestations. Because this approach seems to treat the term *power* as a primitive, those who use it bypass the definition stage altogether. We believe that the explication of power bases or modes of influence is an activity from which we may productively seek guidance for future work, and return later for a

fuller elaboration. Strictly speaking, however, it does not constitute a definition.

A significant number of writers approach the task of defining power by describing what it does, without directly attending to how it works. Thus, Kanter (1983) said that power "is intimately connected with the ability to produce; it is the capacity to mobilize people and resources to get things done" (p. 213). According to Morgan (1986), "Power is the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved. Power influences who gets what, when, and how" (p. 158). Mintzberg (1983) defined power "simply as the ability to effect (or affect) organizational outcomes" (p. 4). Hook (1979) wrote that "In its most generic sense, power is the ability to influence the behavior of others in order to further our desires and purposes" (p. 4). Definitions of this type have the appeal of being broad enough perhaps to encompass the phenomenon while being innocuous enough to deflect controversy. An individual can use the term *power* much as a politician might speak of "The American Way": All who hear it "understand" the expression (or so they think), but utterly fail actually to *understand each other*.

We believe that much confusion found in the literature can be traced to a lack of consensus on the nature, definition, and parameters of interpersonal power. Silber (1979), reviewing an honors program lecture series on the topic of power, observed the implicit assumption that:

Power can be discussed on whatever terms one wishes to discuss it, that power is not a subject whose independent nature and structure we must respect and try to understand, observe, and delineate with great care and maximum precision. Rather, power is seen to mean whatever the individual discussing it wants it to mean, and in discussing power we are free from all rational and empirical restraints. That is: Humpty Dumpty was right. Humpty Dumpty's position reflects the dominant relativism of our time. Hand in hand with a highly subjective individualism, it now approaches the limiting condition, namely solipsism. (p. 192)

Silber is right, of course. The difficulty in defining with adequate precision the topic under discussion is not merely a point of irony or of frustration: It is substantively problematic. In an earlier review of work on power and compliance gaining, we "found inadequate attention devoted to conceptualization and to factors relevant to the compliance gaining process" (Wheless, Barraclough, & Stewart, 1983, p. 106). What we discovered was a substantial collection of studies that did not replicate well and studies with contradictory and incompatible results. The situation has hardly improved in the intervening years. To date, no one has offered to explain the inconsistent findings. No empirical data base convincingly

establishes the superiority of any one perspective. Perhaps most frustrating is that there does not appear to be much genuine dialogue regarding the logically prior issues of definition and conceptualization. It is partly in the hope of furthering that dialogue that this chapter is written.

In the context of this chapter, we define *power* as the potential or capacity to influence the behavior of some other person or persons. Compliance gaining, or behavior alteration, is the realization of that potential.

### CONCEPTUALIZING THE BASES OF POWER

Efforts to conceptualize power as a complex phenomenon are often considered to have begun with Weber (1947, 1969). Beginning with the argument that power included imperative control as well as authority or legitimate control, Weber seemed to consider legitimate authority to be the most interesting and important for organizational functioning. The efficacy of legitimate authority is founded upon the following principles:

1. *Charisma*, when people come to believe that a person's special characteristics qualify that individual to lead and act on behalf of the followers;
2. *Tradition*, when people have respect for customs and patterns of behavior, and grant authority to those who symbolize these traditions and values; and
3. the *Rule of Law*, when people believe the proper exercise of power is a function of adherence to procedure and the following of rules.

In situations where one or more of these conditions can be found, people grant the social approval necessary to stabilize power relations, that is, they recognize that someone has the right to rule and they consider it their duty to obey.

Among more recent attempts to delineate the bases of power, is that which was derived deductively by French and Raven (1960). French and Raven argue for five types of power:

1. *Reward* power, based on the target's perception that the agent has the ability to mediate rewards for her or him;

2. *Coercive* power, based on the target's perception that the agent has the ability to mediate punishments for her or him;
3. *Legitimate* power, based on the target's perception that the agent has a legitimate right to prescribe and/or proscribe behavior for her or him;
4. *Referent* power, based on the target's identification with the agent; and
5. *Expert* power, based on the target's perception that the agent has some special knowledge or expertness.

It should be noted that both the Weber and the French and Raven power bases deal with the juxtaposition of an agent or source of communication in relation to a target or receiver of that communication.

Etzioni (1961) suggested that "power differs according to the means employed to make the subjects comply" (p. 5). Here we find three general kinds of power, one of which is further subdivided:

1. *Coercive* power, achieved through threats of pain, deformity, and death, restriction of movement, control of food, sex and comfort, and the like;
2. *Remunerative* power, achieved through control over material resources, such as money, fringe benefits, services, and commodities;
3. *Normative* power, achieved through control of symbolic rewards and deprivations.

Etzioni further delineates two different types of normative power: *Pure normative* power, based on the manipulation of esteem, prestige, and ritualistic symbols; and *social* power, based on the allocation and manipulation of acceptance and positive response.

It is significant that Etzioni shifted attention slightly: from potentialities to actualities, or at least to probabilities. For instance, where the coercive power described by French and Raven operates on the basis of the target's perception that the agent has the *ability* to mediate punishments, Etzioni's coercive power would appear to operate on the basis of the agent's *actually making a threatening statement*. The difference is subtle, but real.

A succinct analysis of social or interpersonal power is provided by Kelman (1961, 1974). Kelman explained that there are three qualitatively different processes of social influence:

1. *Compliance*, when one accepts the influence of another (person or group) because he or she hopes to achieve a favorable reaction from that other;
2. *Identification*, when one adopts behavior derived from another because this behavior is associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship to that other person or group; and
3. *Internalization*, when one accepts influence because the induced behavior is consistent with her or his value system.

Although Etzioni focused on what the agent is doing, Kelman drew our attention away from the agent and toward the target. These three processes of social influence all deal with internal states of the target. It should also be noted that, as with Weber's work, the existence of these states is logically prior to any actual operation of power, such as described by French and Raven. Referent power, for example, is operative only *after* the target has chosen to identify with the agent; and legitimate power requires the existence of an internalized value system that grants to some agent(s) the right to make certain behavioral demands. Again, the shifts in emphasis or focus are subtle, but real.

Parsons (1963) has also examined power, dealing, in his terms, with those situations where one person ("ego") attempts to get results by bringing to bear on another person or persons ("alter") some kind of communicative operation: pressure. This pressure (or power) Parsons argued, is best interpreted first in terms of whether the agent (ego) focuses on the target's (alter's) intentions or on the situation; and second in terms of whether the sanctions or pressures brought to bear are positive or negative. The agent utilizes the situation channel by making it advantageous or disadvantageous for the target to engage in a specified behavior; the agent makes use of the intentions channel by focusing on the rightness or wrongness of the behavior in question. Thus we have four modes of power or influence:

1. *Persuasion*, where ego seeks, through positive sanctions, to influence alter's intentions ("It's right");
2. *Inducement*, where ego seeks, through positive sanctions, to control the situation ("It's advantageous");
3. *Activation of commitments*, where ego seeks, through negative sanctions, to influence alter's intentions ("It's wrong") and
4. *Deterrence*, where ego seeks, through negative sanctions, to control the situation ("It's disadvantageous").