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## Understanding Power in the College Classroom

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## RESEARCH WATCH

*From time to time, some faculty express dismay at the drift of current conversations about improving teaching. They complain that they are being asked to become "too soft." Students have become uncivil and even abusive at times, they complain. These faculty want to know how to regain control, not how to be a nicer human being. Aubrey Immelman's short introduction to the research literature on power and the effect of different kinds of power on teachers and students suggests some things that will make these faculty happy—and a couple that probably won't. Knowing one's subject matter emerges as one of the most powerful bases of power in the classroom. Faculty have long said that. But control through any form of coercion has had long-term effects. The data seem to point back to "referent" power, which some see as being a "nice guy."*

## Understanding Power in the College Classroom

*Aubrey Immelman  
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**E**ducators are sometimes unaware of the pervasive influence of power in the college classroom. This is unfortunate because a better understanding of power dynamics in the teaching-learning situation can help us become more constructive teachers, and our students more productive learners. Part of the difficulty in conversations about power is that people attach multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings to the concept. Though the term *power* can denote a broad range of meaning, educators should be specifically concerned about *social power*.

## What is Power?

In defining social power, it is important to recognize the reciprocal nature of power. Social power is mediated both by the capacity to *exert* influence and the opposing capacity to *resist* such influence. The term *powerholder* refers to those in social transactions who have the capacity to exert more influence than can be resisted by *targets* of such social influence. This reciprocal, interdependent nature of social power is evident in the following formula derived from the seminal work of John French and Bertram Raven:

POWER OF A OVER B = FORCE BY A -  
RESISTANCE BY B

Power is a dependent variable or outcome jointly determined by force and resistance. Social power may therefore be defined as an index of the social influence of one party over another.

## The Bases of Social Power

What are the sources from which teachers draw their power? French and Raven developed a model of social power that specifies six sources of power in social contexts: the capacity to reward and to punish, investment with legitimate rights, the distinction of reverence or respect, possession of expertise, and persuasiveness (see Table 1). In short, power in the classroom derives from the degree of control that teachers have over these power bases in the college setting.

Table 1  
**French and Raven's  
Taxonomy of Power  
Bases**

<i>Power base</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<b>Reward</b>	The ability to mediate the distribution of positive or negative reinforcers
<b>Coercive</b>	The capacity to dispense punishments to those who do not comply with requests or demands

(Table 1, continued)

Power base	Definition
<b>Legitimate</b>	Authority that derives from the powerholder's legitimate right to require and demand compliance
<b>Referent</b>	Influence over others that is based on their identification with, attraction to or respect for the powerholder
<b>Expert</b>	Power that derives from others' assumption that the powerholder possesses superior skills and abilities
<b>Informational</b>	Power based on the persuasive content of communication

(Sources: French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1988; Forsyth, 1990)

### The Metamorphic Effects of Power

Power, as a measure of social influence, is accompanied by changes in both powerholders (i.e., teachers) and targets (i.e., students).

### Potential Effects on Students

Research by Raven has identified a number of reactions to the exercise of power. The potential learning outcomes associated with the exercise of the various types of power are summarized in Table 2.



Table 2

### Power Bases and Metamorphic Effects

Power base	Potential effect
<b>Reward</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tends to generate compliance rather than internalization in target</li> <li>• May yield dislike for powerholder</li> </ul>
<b>Coercive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tends to generate compliance rather than internalization in target</li> <li>• May generate active resistance by target</li> <li>• Typically yields dislike for powerholder</li> <li>• Yields perception of control over target</li> <li>• Heightened self-evaluation by powerholder</li> <li>• Devaluation of target by powerholder</li> <li>• Increased distance between target and powerholder</li> </ul>
<b>Legitimate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May yield dislike for powerholder</li> </ul>
<b>Referent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quite likely to generate internalization</li> <li>• May yield greater liking for powerholder</li> </ul>
<b>Expert</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quite likely to generate internalization</li> <li>• May yield greater liking for powerholder</li> </ul>
<b>Informational</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most likely to generate internalization</li> <li>• May yield greater liking for powerholder</li> </ul>

(Sources: Forsyth, 1990; Kipnis, Castell, Gergen, & Mauch, 1976; Raven, 1988)

### Potential Effects on Teachers

David Kipnis and his associates have shown empirically that the exercise of strong means of influence (primarily coercive power) tends to have a damaging effect on powerholders. Although this research was not conducted in an educational setting, it does not take a great leap of faith to extrapolate the findings to the college classroom. These changes in the powerholder are summarized below, along with their implications in terms of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (summarized in Table 3).

### Table 3 Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

The teacher:

1. encourages student-faculty contact;
2. encourages cooperation among students;
3. encourages active learning;
4. gives prompt feedback;
5. emphasizes time on task;
6. communicates high expectations;
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

(Source: Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

**Perceived control.** The belief that one controls the target discourages active learning and undermines respect for students' diverse talents and ways of learning.

**Devaluation.** Devaluation of students by teachers may discourage cooperation among students and in extreme cases may set the stage for student-teacher conflict.

**Increase of social and psychological distance.** Increasing the social distance between teacher and students discourages student-faculty contact.

**Heightened self-evaluation.** Inflated self-evaluation by teachers, particularly if coupled with devaluation of students, encourages social categorization (Us vs. Them), undermines teacher-student collaboration and is unlikely to create a cooperative classroom atmosphere.

The theoretical framework for discussing power relations in educational settings shows that research on the metamorphic effects of power provides an empirical basis for the constructive use of power in the college classroom. As a broad generalization, teachers should concentrate on strengthening their informational, expert, and referent power bases; they should limit their use of legitimate and reward power, and avoid coercion at practically any cost. These "ground rules" provide teachers with guidelines for exercising the considerable power vested in them by virtue of their role in the teaching-learning enterprise. |||

References for this article may be downloaded from the Forum's Web site – <http://www.ntlf.com>

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