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The Role of the TA in the Interactive Classroom

CHAPTER 35

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The notion of an interactive classroom alters our conception of the relationship between teacher and student. We tend to simplify the role of each by depicting the flow of power and information as moving in only one direction. In a burst of overstatement (or redundancy, as the case may be), Burroughs, Kearney and Plax (1989) shatter this depiction by characterizing the relationship instead as one of "reciprocal interdependence." Their intent is to highlight the *exchange* of influence and ideas which occurs in classroom settings by exploring the potential power resources and strategies available to both the teacher and the student. For the purposes of this discussion, then, "interactive classroom" refers to a classroom in which students and teachers alike participate via discussion, critical feedback, and performance.

If the relationship between student and teacher is rendered more complex by the notion of an interactive classroom, the complexity is multiplied when the teacher role is assumed by a teaching assistant. While it is not the intent of this paper to expound on the ways in which the roles of professor and teaching assistant differ, a quick overview of French and Raven's five bases of power (discussed in Kearney, Plax, Richmond, and McCroskey, 1985) provides a measure of the difference. The coercive and reward power of the teaching assistant is generally on par with that of a professor to the extent that the teaching assistant determines the grades and the course structure. The other three bases of power—legitimate, referent and expert—are stronger for professors than teaching assistants, especially initially. Student perceptions of a teaching assistant's right to make demands (legitimate power base) and of his or her competence in specific areas (expert power base) are often impacted by the comparative lack of experience and status of the TA as compared to a professor. In addition, while some might argue that a

student's desire to comply in order to please or identify with a teacher (referent power base) would be stronger for a TA than a professor because of age proximity and the like, the issue of perceived status is likely to be greater; a professor has the potential for a stronger referent power base.

Defining the interactive classroom and distinguishing between professor as teacher and teaching assistant as teacher sets the context for discussion of the role issues faced by TAs. The following questions guide the discussion: What are the pressures that face TAs who must facilitate rather than command a class? How does the TA manage appropriate boundaries while functioning as a personal risk taker and active class participant? What are the risks involved in serving as a model of performance behavior? How does the TA establish a persona that includes both participant and evaluator roles? The intent is to develop guidelines for creating, monitoring and maintaining an interactive classroom.

Facilitator vs. Commander

To begin, consider again what might be called the traditional model of teacher/student roles. In this model, the teacher is the sender imparting information and/or knowledge to the receiving student who then processes and applies it. The teacher dictates the structure of the class and controls the flow of information thereby assuming a position of command. The student, in turn, is the one being commanded (or directed) to learn in a certain manner a certain amount and kind of information. The roles in this model are clearly defined by attributing to each a set function: sender/receiver, commander/ commanded. At what point, if at all, do these two roles intersect? At what point are they most polarized?

The intersection of teacher/student roles in the "traditional" model is difficult to track. One might hypothesize that a moment of intersection occurs at the point of information transfer: as a teacher lectures and the students take in the information, there are moments of intersection when teacher and student arrive at the same point at the same time. The roles are most polarized when issues of control are foremost: the teacher controls, the student is controlled.

What happens to student/teacher roles if the interactive lens is superimposed instead? At what point(s) do the roles intersect and what are the tensions that are manifested? Do similarities arise between the roles? Are these similarities superficial in nature with the deeper power issues polarized as in the traditional model?

It is interesting to note that while the roles of teacher and student become somewhat blurred in an interactive classroom, the issue of power still tends to separate and clarify each. The level and the type of power used to create and sustain these roles is, however, quite different. Whereas in the "traditional" model the teacher was commander, in the interactive model, the teacher is more like a conductor, making it possible for interaction among a variety of individuals to occur more easily and fluidly. The level of control is lessened, in one sense, because the interaction between teacher

and students and students and students, impacts what and how information will be covered. Control is still present but it must be renegotiated in light of *student* input and power strategies.

This shift in the level and origin of control reveals several points of tension in the relationship between students and TA. To get at these, consider this example. A TA wishes to lead a discussion about course materials which the students have been asked to read. The TA begins by asking the class at large a general question about the reading such as, "What was the reading about?" No one answers. Most of the students seem intent on scrutinizing the covers of their books and/or the tiles on the floor rather than on interacting with the TA. The TA, hoping to break the silence and "get the discussion going" asks a slightly different question such as, "What are your impressions of the reading?" Again, no response. The TA then addresses a third question to a particular student, calling her by name; "What were your impressions of the reading, Sue?" The student confesses to not having done the reading and offers no further input. Once again, silence.

This example demonstrates the tension that exists between student power strategies and TA power strategies. Students can coerce and reward a teacher and the potential for such coercion and reward is greater to the extent that students are asked to take an active role in the classroom. In the "traditional" model, this tension is handled by masking or denying it. Students are rendered "powerless" (at least on the surface) by being placed in a receiver-only position. Any response is strictly governed by rules developed by the teacher (e.g. tests, papers, etc.). What often happens, as demonstrated in this example, is that a TA attempts to move towards an interactive relationship without changing power strategies. The TA in the example asks overly broad questions without first setting the context for those questions. Students are unsure how to respond and unsure how their responses will be received. The slight change in the question each time adds to the confusion. And, when no response is forthcoming, the TA uses coercion (calling a student by name) to try and get a response.

The students, in turn, respond by using similar power strategies. They withhold their response and involvement and thereby coerce the TA into a difficult position. The TA must either revert to the commander/commanded relationship or negotiate the new relationship more explicitly with appropriate shifts in the power strategies used to establish this relationship.

A second tension revealed by this example concerns *how* interaction will occur (as opposed to the above discussion which might be said to address *whether* interaction will occur). In the example, the TA initiates the discussion by asking a general question. What does such a question imply about the way the interaction is to proceed? On one hand, a general question might "open up" discussion since students may be under less pressure to answer "correctly." In addition, a more general question may avoid "teacher-directedness" of more specific questions. Here again, however, the notion of context setting is important. In the example, the failure of the students to respond to a general question indicates that the context for such a question has not been properly set.

The TA reinforces the ambiguous context by asking similar (but not quite the same) questions rather than providing some sense of how the discussion is to proceed and why. Such ambiguity can be extremely problematic when issues of power predominate, as in the student/teacher relationship. Unless the relationship is configured in such a way as to handle it, ambiguity can lead to resentment and distrust.

A third point of tension stems from the issue of *how* the interaction proceeds. Namely, *what* will the interaction be about? Or, who will determine the content of the interaction? One's initial response to these two questions demonstrates the affective strength of the "traditional" teacher role. The tendency is to argue that, naturally, the teacher should and does determine what the content of the interaction will be. However, this perspective does not take into account the way in which student interaction impacts the teacher's choices, or the importance of increased levels of student involvement to the success of an interactive environment. In the example, the TA's general questions might be construed as leaving an opening for student input as to the content of the discussion. However, open questions can also serve as a means of re-asserting the teacher's role as agenda setter since the vast range of possible responses inevitably requires someone to select which will be pursued and which not. Student involvement is limited when only certain pre-determined responses are deemed as acceptable to the ensuing discussion.

From this discussion, the TA as facilitator in an interactive classroom faces three major pressures: 1) competing power strategies, 2) difficulty in achieving mutual interaction due to an ambiguous context, and 3) difficulty in attaining high levels of involvement due to de-emphasis of students' agenda setting impact. Given the example and the discussion, what are possible guidelines for TAs who face these pressures?

1. At the beginning of the class, the roles of both the students and the teacher (TA) must be explicitly *redefined*. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways (developing a class code of ethics, establishing a classroom community with certain rules of etiquette, etc.) but the focus should be on mutual elements of power and the resulting mutual responsibility. Moving away from the traditional model does not mean a lack of role definition (a complete blurring of roles). Instead, it requires a re-definition of roles.
2. Structure the class to accommodate a certain level of ambiguity by clearly establishing the context for interactions. For instance, in the example above, the TA might give a brief introduction before moving to more general questions, or the TA might begin with specific questions which give a sense of how and why the interaction is to proceed and which allow the students to move the discussion to more general questions. The intent is to provide a frame in which a variety of exchanges can occur.
3. Structure the class so that student impact on content decisions is evident. This can be done in a variety of ways, the simplest being to make explicit links between student questions and performances and the material that is covered.

To encourage higher levels of involvement, put students in charge of discussion, set up mock debates which require students to decide how certain topics will be handled and what positions are warranted, have students critique one another's performances, etc.

As is indicated, these general guidelines can be used to develop specific techniques for creating and managing an interactive classroom. From here we move to an exploration of specific role issues including the TA as class participant, the TA as personal risk taker and the TA as role model.

Performance Boundaries

How does the TA manage appropriate boundaries while functioning as a personal risk taker and active class participant? What are the risks involved in serving as a model of performance behavior? These questions push us to re-define the TA role more explicitly because they point to potential constraints upon and/or limits to an interactive relationship between students and teacher. In discussing the traditional model against a more interactive model, the tendency is to perceive roles as more clearly defined in the traditional model. A more accurate description of the difference, however, is that in the traditional model, roles are *assumed* (perhaps even ordained), whereas in the interactive model, a continuous and explicit re-definition and clarification of roles must occur.

This continual process of role definition might seem to detract from "matters at hand" in the classroom. However, role definition requires role negotiation, an exchange between teacher and student which can serve as a model for the interactive learning process. To get at this process more specifically, consider the following example. A TA wishes to emphasize his or her role as class participant in order to stimulate more mutual interaction. To do so, the TA attempts to identify with students by exchanging jokes, chatting with students before class and revealing personal aspects of his or her life. In classroom discussion, the TA continues this kind of behavior by placing students in charge of discussion and by participating at the same level as other students. Initially, students embrace this type of interaction and attempt to see how far they can assert their role in the relationship. They begin to challenge the TA's comments and suggestions in an attempt to determine the boundaries of what is appropriate. If the TA provides no sense of these boundaries, the students become frustrated and disgusted because the terms of the relationship are still based on power (grades are still given) but the rules are out of their hands (even more so than in the traditional model where at least they *know* the rules and can therefore feel some sense of control).

This example demonstrates the relationship between intent and power (Conrad in Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983, p. 183). If the TA's actions undermine what students believe to be his or her intent based on the consequences of those actions, confusion results. On the other hand, if consistency is maintained between the TA's intent, actions, and the consequences of those actions, the process of role negotiation becomes an important learning tool. Students gain a clearer sense of what learning is about. They are

asked to be involved in the process by questioning their own assumptions as well as the assumptions of others. In so doing they begin to determine why, as well as which, actions are "appropriate" and they gain a clearer sense of the way in which roles and other social phenomenon are constructed.

This discussion also provides some insight into the problems as well as the positive outcomes of risk-taking behavior on the part of the TA. Particularly in a performance course where students are asked to take risks by exposing and exploring their identities and ideas in new and different ways, the TA must provide a context which enables such behavior. If the intent is to get students to learn by doing, simply structuring the class around assignments which require such behavior is not enough. The TA must take risks as well. But what risks and within what boundaries?

Consider, again, the example above. The TA takes a risk by establishing identification between the student and him or herself. The risk becomes problematic if the identification is carried too far, in other words, if the TA's behavior denies or masks the differences (which continue to exist, despite the TA's behavior) between student/teacher roles. These differences are part of what forms the relationship; to disregard them implies deception. Thus, identification must be achieved in the context of differences. When the TA becomes a participant, the power relationship is changed. To operate without acknowledging that change yields an interactive class in name only, just as denying the existent power differential causes frustration and disgust. The power relationship must therefore be re-established in light of the consequences of actions and the aspects of the relationship which *have not* changed.

Along these same lines, risks and boundary issues come to the fore when the TA serves as a model of performance behavior. In an interactive classroom, such modeling can be essential to success. How are students to know how to perform and/or what is expected of them in this new role if there is no model to observe? The TA can verbally explain what he or she means by performance and provide needed clarity. The combination of verbal explanation and modeling behavior greatly increases the probability that students will *participate* and will participate *successfully*. The TA must therefore be both/and, both teacher *and* student: teacher to the extent that he or she directs and controls the content, kind, and consequences of interaction; student to the extent that he or she *participates* (as opposed to commands or leads) in discussion and performance thereby sharing (taking only part) control with the rest of the class. If the both/and balance is not consistently maintained, modeling behavior is impossible. The TA becomes simply "teacher" with accompanying "teacher behaviors" or "student" with accompanying "student behaviors."

From this discussion, what are guidelines for the TA who must manage appropriate boundaries while functioning as a class participant, a risk taker, and/or a model of performance behavior?

1. Consistency must be maintained between intent, actions, and consequences. If the intent of the TA is to teach students how to perform a specific skill, then

his or her actions and the consequences of those actions should support that intent.

2. Acknowledge explicitly and implicitly the differences between student and teacher roles by changing behaviors to match shifting contexts. This can be accomplished by clearly establishing the way in which the power relationship shifts along with changes in behavior and context. In other words, while the TA may encourage students to challenge and condemn his or her ideas during the heat of discussion, the TA must also make clear the extent to which students need to conform with his or her ideas. This helps students to understand the way in which boundaries are set and how to challenge without dismantling them.
3. Finally, in order to serve as a model of performance behavior, the TA must maintain the difference between student/teacher roles while at the same time partaking of each. In *Teaching as Performing*, Timpson and Tobin argue this point persuasively by demonstrating the self-reflexiveness that is necessary for both teachers and performers. In order to have some system for improvement, they claim, teachers must also be students.

If teachers must be students, at least to a certain extent, what does this imply for the TA as evaluator? How is the interactive classroom monitored? The following discussion addresses these issues.

The TA as Participant-Evaluator

As the previous discussions have indicated, the teacher/ student relationship (like many other relationships) is based on, or at least governed by, power. In the traditional model, the evaluator role is as strong as, if not stronger than, the teacher's information sender role. In the interactive model, a third role, that of participant, complicates the impact and the implementation of the first two. Up to this point, we have dealt most specifically with the way in which the participant role impacts the information sender role. Shift the focus and the question becomes: how do power strategies, shifting roles and shifting contexts impact evaluation? How does the TA establish a personae which includes both participant and evaluator roles?

The evaluator role, like that of the commander, is based in coercion and reward. Evaluation in the form of grades can be used to reward students who have succeeded in participating and performing appropriately according to the teacher's standards. The threat of bad grades can coerce others into participating and performing in conformity, more or less, with those same standards. However, the TA, in attempting to be both teacher and student, lays bare the way in which standards as well as individual roles are constructed. The door is opened for student challenge and dispute because the evaluator role is made less mysterious and more accessible. In addition, since the TA is actively taking part in the class, the notion of removed objectivity to which the traditional model

clings disintegrates. Particularly in performance courses, the TA is neither removed or objective, at least not in any absolute sense.

In order to reconcile the role of evaluator and participant, the TA in the interactive classroom must function as a critic. A critic is involved in and/or with what he or she is criticizing, just as the TA in an interactive course is involved in the interactions which he or she is evaluating. A level of objectivity is achieved by taking a critical approach; in other words, the critic questions the assumptions of both the critic and of others. Criticism requires an evaluation of some sort based on standards that are negotiated and made explicit in the process of criticizing. In addition, the process of evaluation through criticism teaches students how to be critical. It may open their eyes to the TA's grading processes but it also enables them to better understand the critical/evaluative process, an important aspect of their continued learning.

What are guidelines for the TA who is both participant and evaluator?

1. Structure the course so that students learn to criticize their own works as well as the work of others according to a variety of standards. This may require the imposition of more structure than is normally necessary (for example, have students criticize a speech by very different criteria than normally used to enable them to see how that changes and shapes the evaluation), but it should reap benefits in their understanding of how the TA approaches evaluation.
2. Make clear from the start expectations and standards which are assumed by the course and then build on these with standards or criteria that evolve from the class interaction.
3. Be straightforward about subjectivity in the evaluation process but set up structures which will force the TA to move towards objectivity. For example, use a numerical grading scale to grade a performance oriented course, assigning a point value rather than a letter grade to the performance of a variety of skills.

Taken together, the guidelines offered in this paper attempt to provide a starting point for the development and use of specific techniques and skills which will enable the creation and maintenance of an interactive classroom. Issues of power, role and evaluation are key to that success. Understanding the way in which these issues interact provides a means to operate within the constraints which they entail.

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