

## **Playing the Game: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Graduate Education Students' Perceptions of Instructor Power in a Higher Education Classroom**

Antonio Delgado  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore students' experiences with the power of their instructors in a higher education classroom. This study provides a deeper understanding of instructor power from student perspectives to inform teaching practices in the higher education classroom.

Higher education is a distribution center of knowledge and economic, social, and cultural power (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). The distribution of knowledge and power occurs primarily in the higher education classroom. Power, associated with the position of the educator, consists of "formal authority, control over resources and rewards, control over punishment, control over information, and ecological or environmental control" (Cranton, 2006, p. 108). A critical approach to understanding adult learning involves identifying and critiquing concepts relating to power, such as hegemonic ideology and practice, knowledge construction, systems of power and oppression, and barriers limiting liberation and the practice of democracy (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). A critical approach to understanding the higher education classroom begins with recognizing the instructor's position of power and authority (Tisdell, Hanley, & Taylor, 2000). The power instructors wield exists mostly unquestioned, allowing for teaching practices that reproduce the existing societal patterns of inequity in the classroom (Brookfield, 2000). Therefore, the purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore graduate education students' experiences with the power of their instructors in a higher education classroom.

### **The Higher Education Classroom as a Context for Understanding Power**

Instructors as agents of the higher education system exercise a great amount of economic, political, and social power and control over the lives of their students. An educator has the ability to evaluate student learning and performance by assigning a grade at the end of a course. This evaluation is then used for the purpose of credentialing or the awarding of a degree, which then leads the student to additional resources, socioeconomic growth, self-sufficiency, and a better future (Buttaro, 2004; Zalaquett, 2006).

Power is behaviorally manifested in the classroom as instructors exercise the power to control the dynamics of the classroom by "talking down to students, allowing no interruptions or questions, and maintaining complete control over resources, information, and rewards" (Cranton, 2006, p. 122). Students are taught about the power relations in higher education through physical arrangements and through language. Although students are generally told that they live in a free and democratic society, traditional classroom practices teach students to become obedient to unilateral authority (Macedo, 2006).

The conceptual framework for this study emerged from the literature on using a critical approach to understanding adult learning. Critical theory is one of the more recent contributions to the field of adult education and higher education. According to Brookfield (2005), "a critical

approach to understanding adult learning sees it as comprising a number of crucial tasks such as learning how to perceive and challenge dominant ideology, unmask power, contest hegemony, overcome alienation, pursue liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy” (p. 2). Using a critical approach involves questioning the normalcy and exercising of such power and the practice of alienation, particularly by those who are alienated and disadvantaged as a result. This study was an exercise between researcher and participants to discuss and understand how instructors in higher education, who are in positions of power and privilege, have exercised their power, positively or negatively, during our higher education classroom experiences. It was a dialogic process grounded in the discussion and analysis of our own experiences (Brookfield, 2000).

### **Method**

A hermeneutic phenomenological study intertwines the interpretations of both the participants and the researcher about a lived experience to uncover layers of details and to identify the core essence of that lived experience (van Manen, 1990). The use of hermeneutic phenomenology created a space for me as a researcher to explain meanings and assumptions of participants’ experiences based on my own theoretical and personal knowledge (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). The aim was to illuminate lived experiences because the meanings of lived experiences are usually not readily apparent (van Manen, 1990).

#### **Sampling Strategies**

Participants were selected using criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling. Criterion sampling involved reviewing all cases relevant to this study that met the criteria for participation, which was defined as currently enrolled as a graduate student of education at a large, urban public research university in southeast Florida (Patton, 2002). Convenience sampling involved using methods easily accessible and inexpensive to the study (Patton, 2002). Participants for this study were recruited and selected using email listservs that reached all of the graduate students in the College of Education. As a form of snowball sampling, participants were asked to recommend additional students who may provide information-rich cases for this study (Patton, 2002).

#### **Participants**

The 15 participants in the study included nine women and six men. Their ages ranged from under 30 to over 60 years old. In terms of racial-ethnic identification, eight self-reported as being Latino, six as White (non-Latino), and one as African American. Six of the participants were enrolled in an education master’s degree program and nine were enrolled in an education doctoral degree program. With regards to occupation, seven reported employment in a non-instructional role in higher education, three were employed in an instructional role in higher education, four were teachers in grades K-12, one was employed in the corporate sector, and two reported other forms of employment (some participants reported more than one occupation).

#### **Data Collection and Interpretation**

The primary data gathering method were semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol that included main questions and possible follow-up questions to address the research questions of this study (Creswell, 2003). Participants were contacted by email to set up a mutually convenient time for a face-to-face interview. Interviews ranged from 47 to 90 minutes. Additional data, such as thoughts, reflections, and insights during the study, were collected in a research journal.

Data were interpreted using thematic reflection (van Manen, 1990). Ideas and concepts that were recurrent and emerged in the descriptions of respondents’ lived experiences were

considered themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were then shared by email with participants as a form of member checking (Patton, 2002). The aim was for participants to be able to recognize their experiences in the initial findings and themes and offer new insights to better capture and explain their experiences. Of the 15 participants, a total of nine responded and all nine expressed support of my findings. No new insights were provided by participants during the member checking process.

### **How Students Perceived Instructor Power in the Higher Education Classroom**

The research questions in this study were designed to explore student experiences involving the power of their instructors in the higher education classroom. Three themes emerged from data interpretation: (a) structuring of instructor-student relationships, (b) connecting power to instructor personality, and (c) learning to navigate the field of higher education.

#### **Structuring of Instructor-Student Relationships**

The way instructor-student relationships were structured in the higher education classroom shaped how students perceived power in the higher education classroom. Participants frequently used the metaphor of family to explain the instructor-student relationship and identified the ethic of caring and nurturing as important qualities by which to understand the instructor-student relationship. The hierarchical perspective from earlier education experiences were perceived and expressed by comparing instructors to typical parental figures such as mother, father, uncle or aunt. This perception of a familial hierarchy to understand the classroom flattens somewhat in higher education so that the instructor-student relationship is increasingly seen from a collegial perspective as participants progressed from undergraduate to graduate studies.

When participants perceived their instructors as having a positive influence on them, participants identified caring and nurturing as values that defined the instructor's professional practice of teaching. The discussion of an ethic of caring and nurturing by instructors flowed from the family metaphor. Caring is an expression of concern, whether explicitly or implicitly, for another person. "He cared about me learning" (Elizabeth 35:3). "I think that she had a caring heart" (Jessica 38:4). "It's the attitude and the essence of their teaching and their presence in the classroom that makes the student say this person cares for me" (Mariana 41:10). When the instructor cares about a student, the instructor is interested in not only that student's learning in the course, but their overall personal and professional success and well-being. Participants generally perceived that it was really up to the instructor more so than the student to establish the tone for the instructor-student relationship because instructors had "the power to shape the environment in the class" and "the power to lead the students in a direction that will be beneficial for that student" (Leila 40:43).

When participatory forms of instruction were used, participants felt that instructors used their power to validate other forms of knowledge/ways of knowing. "You release the intellectual capital in the class. He [the instructor] was not threatened by that at all" (Elizabeth 35:11). "He brought such positive energy to the classroom. He really got you participating" (Leila 40:19). "You feel that your voice is valuable and that a lot of people's voices are very valuable" (Leila 40:23). Because of the less hierarchical structure that was perceived by participants when they were in a highly participative and open classroom, participants placed less emphasis on the instructor's formal power and authority in the classroom.

### **Connecting Power to Instructor Personality**

When participants discussed instructor power in the higher education classroom, their perceptions were mostly reflections of the instructors as unique individuals, rather than as agents of the higher education system. In essence, the exercises of power were perceived as indicators of instructors' personality traits. For example, one of the participants shared about one of her instructors, "his personality is very eccentric and very blunt. Some people find that offensive" (Daniela 34:5). Even in light of derogatory comments involving racism or sexism, some participants still attributed those behaviors to the instructor's personality traits or identity rather than seeing those behaviors as part of a larger pattern of racism or sexism permeating the academy. Participants were more likely to label the particular comments as being racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. rather than label the particular instructor as a racist, sexist, or homophobe.

Because an instructor is already in a position of power, unreasonable exercises of power were considered a reflection of a personality flaw of the instructor. Sometimes the unreasonable exercises of power were explicit, such as verbally or physical confronting students in the classroom. Nicole shared an instructor once told her in front of the class, "I did not get a Ph.D. because I am an idiot....So if I were you, I would sit down and leave it as is" (Nicole 43:3). Other times, the unreasonable demonstrations of power were more implicit in the classroom interactions between instructor and students. For example, instructors dominated the classroom time to "brag the hell out of himself" (Elizabeth 35:31), "fall asleep in class" (Leila 40:28), or "pontificated for the entire 3 hours we were in class and focused a lot on himself, projects that he was working on, issues he had with the school [and] with the faculty" (Hirv 37:6). In all of the situations where participants discussed instances they thought instructors used their power unreasonably, not one of the participants addressed the issue with their instructor.

### **Learning to Navigate the Field of Higher Education**

As participants progressed from undergraduate to graduate studies, they perceived expertise in content or knowledge development as secondary to expertise in successfully navigating the field of higher education. Strategies participants used to navigate the field included using evaluations of instructor performance, preserving the self, and learning to play the game.

Participants relied on non-institutional sources of student evaluations to gain insights on what to possibly expect when they entered a new instructor-student relationship. Student evaluations administered by institutions of higher education were generally not available to participants or perceived as unreliable because students may be reluctant to truly share their feedback about the instructor's effectiveness until they felt their grades had been safely recorded. Students may have not known, or doubted, instructors receive their student evaluations several weeks after official grades have been submitted for the term. Participants reported that they looked to other information sources to find out information about their instructors such as the Internet and more specifically RateMyProfessors.com. Michael shared that current students "have it easier than a lot of us had in the past with all this 'Rate the Professor' stuff. You can just Google and figure out some idea of what the professor's going to grade like" (Michael 42:6).

Self-preserving behaviors as discovered in this study are behaviors that enabled the participants to feel psychologically safe to persist through their educational experiences. For example, self-preservation took place on an intrapersonal level. "I want a grade but I will no longer sacrifice my self-esteem for a grade. That is something I will not do" (Nicole 43:20). In other words, on an intrapersonal level participants engaged in self-preservation by not letting the instructors harm or lessen their self-esteem or self-concept. This is a process of rationalization

used when “logical reasons are given to justify unacceptable behavior,” particularly if it is in “defense against feelings of guilt, to maintain self-respect, and to protect from criticism” (APA, 2009, p. 421). Another self-preserving behavior was deciding not to continue in an instructor-student relationship. Five of the participants (Camilo, Gina, Judy, Sasuke, and Nicole) reported that they dropped a course because they could not continue to be in what they perceived to be a negative instructor-student relationship. Gina, Sasuke, and Nicole changed their major of study altogether because of negative interactions with their instructors. If a student chose to remain in an unfavorable instructor-student relationship rather than exit the relationship, the student engaged in self-preservation in the classroom. Participants shared that some ways to engage in self-preservation in the classroom include: stay quiet, brush off the things that bother you, do not always tell the truth, and make sure you do not get labeled as a trouble-maker.

Participants described their experiences in higher education as ultimately not about what new knowledge or skills they acquired; it was about learning how to play the game. The emphasis was on getting through the process of earning the degree. For example, Leila shared, “You just play the game....I don’t even think that getting a doctorate has made me that much smarter ....I’m getting the credential that will give me power in society. I’m going to be Dr. So and So.” (Leila 40:40) Participants shared stories about how they went along with what the professor wanted, despite what they believed, just because that was required to get them through the process. Learning to play the game is about learning how to acquire the cultural capital that is sought after and that is tied to the educational credential being earned. Playing the game involved learning “how to present oneself vis-à-vis relations of power” in order to earn the rewards that follow the cultural capital (Isserles & Dalmage, 2000, p. 160). The rewards may include a job, entry to a profession, promotion, or acceptance at another educational institution. Entering into the field of higher education requires the implicit adherence of the rules of the game (Swartz, 1997). For participants, the ability to play the game successfully was facilitated when there was consistency in the rules of the game. Participants alluded to a preference for consistency of instructor behavior, over finding them to be caring, nurturing, or agreeable.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study revealed that by the time participants enrolled in higher education, they were already aware of the power of their instructors. Their awareness of instructor power stems primarily from their prior learning experiences in their primary and secondary school experiences. The family was an important agent in legitimizing instructor power, particularly for participants from immigrant families that placed an emphasis on earning a college degree in order to climb the socioeconomic ladder and secure a better life and future than did their parents. As a result, participants perceived instructors as gatekeepers to the status or credentials sought in higher education. In other words, instructors possessed power as gatekeepers to cultural capital.

Two expectations widely shared by participants were that instructors should exhibit an ethic of caring and nurturing. When instructors violated those expectations, participants emotionally distanced themselves from the relationship. The strategies then participants adopted were focused on task and course completion, rather than finding self-fulfillment in the course material, learning experiences, or the instructor-student relationship. As a result, participants experienced elements of alienation in their educational experiences.

Although instructors are bound by rules, institutional and public policy, institutional and professional expectations, peer faculty pressure, and other forms of oversight, participants viewed instructors as having a lot of freedom over their work. Instructors can choose to be

flexible and understanding when particular life circumstances require scheduling accommodations for students, or they can choose to remain rigid with the established deadlines they indicated on their syllabi. Instructors can choose to allow students to write a paper, which is graded and returned, or instructors can choose to require students to engage in peer review and then to revise and resubmit papers so that they learn how to improve their writing skills. Instructor power is discretionary. Although there is no doubt that students must earn their grade, what participants questioned is the extent to which instructors' decision-making is influenced by subjectivity when evaluating student performance (Isserles & Dalmage, 2000). None of the participants actively questioned the normalcy of this exercise of power or the mechanisms that permit this discretionary exercise of power to occur.

Participants ultimately described the experiences involving the power of their instructors in the higher education classroom as playing the game. The more participants perceived themselves to be confident, self-aware, and self-assured, the more likely they were to not internalize the instances of instructor power. Those who allowed those experiences of instructor power to be internalized were more likely to have sought ways to escape the relationship by dropping the course or changing their major. Those who had a higher level of perceived self-confidence had an easier time brushing off the instances of instructor power and then just play the game. Participants found the more they progressed through their higher education – from undergraduate to graduate studies – the better equipped they were to play the game.

Playing the game can be primarily interpreted in two different ways. The first is from a negative perspective that connotes triviality of the higher education experience as something participants do not take seriously, lays blame on participants as students, and detracts from the reality of instructor power in the higher education classroom. This negative perspective also places instructors and students in adversarial relationships and assumes conflicting goals and priorities. The other way to interpret the concept of playing the game is from a positive perspective that frames it as an adaptive approach for participants to navigate the sociopolitical terrains of higher education despite instructor power. Playing the game involves preserving the sense of self while trying to maximize the possibility of positive outcomes in a relationship.

### **Implications for Teaching in Higher Education**

The findings from this study have implications for teaching in higher education. Instructors should be cognizant of the difference in power between themselves and students, consider how their teaching practices may influence the difference in power, and work towards creating a democratic classroom (Tisdell, 2001). To foster growth and awareness, instructors should engage in critically reflective teaching about their profession and how they approach instructor-student relationships in the classroom by focusing on the ways power influences educational transactions and how one's assumptions may impact the interest of both students and instructors (Brookfield, 1995).

Because participants described their experiences involving instructor power in the higher education classroom as playing the game, how students learn to play the game is important. But to move students toward a critical awareness of the issues of power involved in the higher education classroom, students need to move beyond learning *how* to play the game to learning *why* the game is played. This is what Freire (2000) referred to as conscientization, which is the process by which students gain a critical consciousness of the social and political sources of oppression. This requires that instructors not only help students understand the sources of power and oppression, but instructors also help students discover ways to take actions that will

empower students to overcome them. Only by learning why the game is played are students then able to bring about changes in how they play the game.

This research contributes to understanding instructor power in a higher education classroom from a bottom-up perspective in the social hierarchy because the researcher and the participants were all students. This research was an exercise in identifying and engaging in the process of unmasking power (Brookfield, 2005). But if students, such as the participants in this study, are generally not able to understand and discuss power from a systems perspective, students may not be learning the tools of critical inquiry and language required to engage as socially active students and citizens (Darder, 1995). What is needed is a critical pedagogy that places politics and ethics at the center of educational theory and practice by recognizing the role educational institutions play in the production of dominant societal identities and cultural practices (Giroux, 2006). When an instructor gives students the opportunity to learn within a culture of critical inquiry and engagement, the instructor, as an agent of the American higher education system, upholds “the knowledge, values, skills, and social relations required for producing individual and social agents capable of addressing the political, economic, and social injustices that diminish the reality and promise of a substantive democracy at home and abroad” (Giroux, 2006, p.2).

### **Considerations for Future Research**

This study raises new questions for areas of future study of higher education students. A concern raised in this research is the hesitancy for participants to label instructors as racist, sexist, homophobic, etc., despite having identified their instructor’s behavior as such. Why is the emphasis on the individual and not the system, or both? In all instances, participants have shifted their language to labeling the behaviors, not the person. Are students generally not equipped with the language and the perspective to be critical even as graduate students? Or does the fact that they are still in the higher education system mean they must continue to play the game? In terms of “playing the game,” future research can explore further the unspoken rules in higher education and whether they are consistent across all different types and sizes of institutions. Furthermore, how can students be empowered to break the rules of the game and question authority without sacrificing any prospects for upward social mobility, access to jobs, and other opportunities?

Future research may also explore different segments of student demographics to understand if there are any differences in the way instructor power is perceived and experienced. This may be conducted in a multitude of ways by exploring possible differences in common demographic categories (e.g., age, race, gender, and ethnicity), courses of study (e.g., undergraduate, masters, and doctoral), or programs of study (e.g., liberal arts, engineering, and business). Research should seek to expose the oppressive underbelly of higher education that reproduces societal systems of power. Until researchers start asking the tough questions to elicit responses and critical thinking from students in higher education, greater understanding that can significantly spark transformation and critical consciousness will not be achieved.

### **References**

- Ajjawi, R., & Higgs, J. (2007). Using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate how experienced practitioners learn to communicate clinical reasoning. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(4), 612-638.
- American Psychological Association. (2009). *APA concise dictionary of psychology*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in*

- Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. (2000). The concept of critically reflective practice. In A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 33-49). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S., & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Buttaro, L. (2004). Second-language acquisition, culture shock, and language stress of adult female Latina students in New York. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 3(1), 21-49.
- Cervero, R. M., & Wilson, A. L. (2001). At the heart of practice: The struggle for knowledge and power. In R. M. Cervero & A. L. Wilson (Eds.), *Power in practice: Adult education and the struggle for knowledge and power in society* (pp. 1-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Darder, A. (1995). Buscando America: The contributions of critical Latino educators to the academic development and empowerment of Latino students in the U.S. In C. E. Sleeter & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference* (pp. 319-348). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Giroux, H. A. (2006). Academic freedom under fire: The case for critical pedagogy. *College Literature*, 33(4), 1-42. doi: 10.1353/lit.2006.0051
- Isserles, R., & Dalmage, H. (2000). Cultural capital as rules and resistance: Bringing it home in the introductory classroom. *Teaching Sociology*, 28(2), 160-165.
- Macedo, D. P. (2006). *Literacies of power*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Swartz, D. (1997). *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2001). The politics of positionality: Teaching for social change in higher education. In R. M. Cervero & A. L. Wilson (Eds.), *Power in practice: Adult education and the struggle for knowledge and power in society* (pp. 145-163). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tisdell, E. J., Hanley, M. S., & Taylor, E. W. (2000). Different perspectives on teaching for critical consciousness. In A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 132-146). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Zalaquett, C. P. (2006). Study of successful Latina/o students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 5(1), 35-47.