Power in the Classroom

With the trend towards more active learning in the classroom, you are likely to see fewer power struggles to maintain quiet and complete a schedule. Students are given tasks, and they work through these tasks, with the instructor having the role of facilitator. This method of teaching and learning seems to engage the students more and lead to better retention. Still, it takes a special kind of instructor, one who does not feel the need to be “in charge” of the classroom, one who tolerates a higher decibel volume, and one who does not have an agenda to follow. As active learning filters down to the high schools and then grade schools, I wonder how it is going to mesh with all the standards that are required and the subsequent testing?

One time, the teacher was the storehouse of knowledge. That will no longer be so. So what would a teacher do? A very good teacher will play the role of augmenter. Also, the teacher will be located anywhere and helping students. — Shiv Nadar

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The changing role of the teacher



I am taking an online class that is focused on power and politics. The text is *Managing with Power, Politics, and Influence in Organizations* by Jeffrey Pfeffer. It got me thinking about power in the

classroom. There is a trend in teaching and learning towards active learning and away from the traditional “sage on a stage.” With the conventional method of teaching, it was evident who was in power, or at least supposed to be. Much of the stress and angst of teaching comes from trying to maintain that power and to follow your syllabus or agenda.

Remember the days of trying to keep the students quiet and focused as you move through your lessons? I have moved out of the classroom and into the training and higher education sector. It was not a surprise to me that I see the same thing there, grown adults in a school required to undergo training to check a box for their organizations, with the facilitator trying desperately to follow the schedule. Recently I had the opportunity to sit in on a ‘train the trainer’ training session. These people were motivated! You could see that they took their job seriously. They wanted to learn the content so they could help their employees. What was going on here? Why do some groups sit there on their phones with a scowl on their faces, and others seem to be excited about learning the content?

The online classroom

As we move to online classes, what will power look like in this setting? An instructor can set an agenda and standards for students to follow, but how will it be reinforced? We can do word counts on discussion boards. We can grade papers with rubrics. We can give graded tests, though these bring up a power and control issue in themselves. How do we guarantee the integrity of our tests? I have taken tests with webcams and microphones, which are timed and require me to show my ID and have my picture taken. Is this sufficient? I guess we will have to pause and consider whether we are testing to make sure that students meet our standards for completion of the course and the subsequent degree, or whether we hope that students will self-police because they want and need a quality education. If it is the first case, we are going to have to work on standards for online learning that help maintain fair and equitable testing and learning environments. If it is the second case, then online learning should fare just as well as in-classroom learning.

Training or teaching?

Maybe the answer lies in moving education into not only active learning but also a ‘train the trainer’ method. After eight years of school, shouldn’t we focus more on training rather than education? Going more toward the technical schools but allowing for the necessary depth of knowledge and critical thinking needed in many professions. Active learning could engage the students and train them to think and problem solve, whereas more of a training mentality would keep the education-focused, it could decrease costs, and it could provide employers with highly trained employees. It seems like a win-win.