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Forget Power Dynamics: Why You Should be BFFs with Your Students and Professors

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Abstract

This paper is half personal narrative and half reflection on the nature of power dynamics in the classroom and writing center. The paper examines the nature and nuances of the word “relationship,” how we interact with the concept of relationships and power, and the ways we limit our joys through limiting the types of relationships we engage in. From there it discusses how to challenge those power dynamics in the classroom and writing center, and the benefits of doing so.

Key Words

Power, dynamic, student, teacher, professor, relationship, connection, community, feedback, criticism, tutor, tutoring, support, supportive, boundaries, self-doubt, success, failure

Forget Power Dynamics: Why You Should be BFFs with Your Students and Professors

Two weeks before graduation I found myself in Scott's office, chatting about the students we'll miss and how to split our grading load. I'd been his teaching assistant for a year and a half, but his student for four. And when no one is listening, we're friends. We loan each other our dog-eared copies of poetry anthologies and Steinbeck novels, swap folk music recommendations like currency, and endlessly harass each other about being long lost siblings. There was a pause in our conversation and we entered the easy silence of friends; we've long since dismantled the power dynamic of student-teacher.

I nestled back into his monstrous overstuffed chair and thought about how much I was going to miss him and BYU-Idaho after I graduated. It took a few seconds to sink in, but when it did, I started crying. Scott uncrossed his legs and leaned towards me, ready to grab the tissue box if needed. We'd been in this position before. He knew the procedure, and so did I. I closed my eyes and tried to think about how to word my next question without sounding silly.

"Are you going to commencement at the end of the month?" My question came out shyly, an oddity at this point in our relationship. Scott looked at me, cocked his head, and leaned back in his chair. "You know I hate parties," he explained. "I avoided as many graduation ceremonies as I could for my own degrees. But to watch you walk across the stage, it will be worth it."

I didn't know it at the time, but that brief exchange would stay with me as a reminder that I am worth the time and effort. I also didn't know that he would continue to email me regularly after graduation; that he would send me his poetry for critique, give advice and support during my LDS mission, and eventually write me a letter of recommendation that he hoped would "raise Lazarus from the dead." Where I expected our relationship to end, he worked to make it flourish.

The word relationship is a loaded one. Whenever I tell stories about Scott, my audience generally assumes we are or were a couple and they ask about how long we have been together. It's always funny -and slightly awkward- to explain that Scott is, in fact, a professor-cum-friend. While I love letting people stew in their own awkwardness, the exchange serves to highlight the way we view relationships and power dynamics. Culturally we reserve "relationship" to denote romantic entanglements, a limitation that hinders our connections as humans. By limiting the word "relationship" to romantic situations, we de-mean deep platonic connections and pseudo-familial bonds. Non-romantic relationships become emotional second class citizens, and are overlooked and marginalized.

Power dynamics compound the complicated relationship we have with the word "relationship." It's quirky to say you have a relationship with an ex-professor, but it raises serious eyebrows to talk about having a relationship with a current professor or students under our care. Are we dating them? Did we cross too many boundaries? Is our comradery influencing the grades we give certain students? Should we even be friendly outside of class? Is real friendship even possible between two people with a power differential? In the context of an institutionalized academic setting, navigating relationships becomes even more complicated.

Despite the heavy intricacies involved in traversing the power dynamics of student-teacher or student-tutor relationships, traverse them we must. Establishing a relationship and pushing against preconceived, institutionalized ideas of power and knowledge is crucial to student success. But what does having a relationship even mean? The Lexico Dictionary gives some helpful pointers, indicating that "relationship" literally means "the state of being connected" (relationship, n1). And isn't that what we want with our students? For them to feel

connected, valued, and heard? When students are connected and feel emotionally secure, there is more room for them to engage authentically with the writing and learning process. A (good) relationship works to exile debilitating self-doubt, perfectionism, and the fear of failure being a permanent state. Through offering support and friendship to our students, our professors, and ourselves, we begin to create a space for experimentation, failure, and ultimately growth. Conversely, when power dynamics and relationship stigmas aren't pushed against, the student wilts and suffers. By reinforcing separateness and Otherhood, students reinternalize the concept that their work is worth less and that their being is less than the tutor or professor.

The concept of relationship, this state of being connected and seen, is the keystone of teaching and tutoring. This is especially true in the writing center, but especially tricky to accomplish. A writing center visit is brief, topping out at just twenty-five minutes long. Unlike Scott and I, a tutor and student don't have nine years to get to know each other and build the kind of trust that allows for brutal honesty and criticism.

But what we lack in time, we can make up for in heart. When students come in to the writing center, they frequently want to simply be told what to do. "Reword this, delete that comma, new paragraph here. Don't use the first person point of view, try bigger words, remove yourself from the writing." These, and similar criticisms, might be what they are used to hearing and interacting with. This type of feedback is the result of a dynamic that gives personhood to one person and objecthood to the other. In other words, it is the power dynamic frequently found in educational settings. But in the writing center, we have the chance to challenge that approach. In our brief twenty-five minutes with a student, we have the opportunity to frame our feedback differently and quietly undermine students' long held assumptions about themselves. We can engage in micro connections; that is, small but lasting kindnesses. Instead of pointing out all the

shortcomings of a paper, we instead work to point out the strengths the student has demonstrated. Where the language is playful or lyrics -even if clumsy- we celebrate it. Where students have worked to conduct good research and covered impressive expanses of intellectual ground, we applaud it. Even if it's not cited quite right. Of course, there are times where a paper is so sorry looking that it's hard to find anything nice to say about it. But in those situations, praise for the personhood of the individual takes the place of celebration of the creation itself. Through our use of positive affirmation and student lead revisions, we help to dismantle a system of objectification and oppression.

While I don't know *exactly* how Scott and I managed to undermine the student-teacher power dynamic, I suspect it was through these micro connections. Over the four years we worked together as student-teacher and employee-employer we quietly ladled kindness on each other, and sought to interact as two equals instead of two cogs in a wheel. While working in the writing center we might not establish lifelong friendships, but we can definitely help a student feel seen and validated. And through those moments of validation and kindness, we might make a difference that transcends the writing process.

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