

Teaching Tips

A forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

Classroom Culture and Sharing Power



Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and once during the summer. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online on the CETL page at <http://mona.uwi.edu/cetl> as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices, please contact us at cetl@uwimona.edu.jm.

Transforming Classroom Culture

We talk all the time about transforming our classrooms. Is this serious talk? If we are serious about transforming classroom culture or making serious changes to the ethos of our classrooms, as university teachers, we must begin to look at power sharing. As teachers, we hold an inordinate amount of power in our classrooms. If we want to create classrooms where our students feel they are included and able to learn to their full potential, we need to examine our own mindsets about the classroom.

Is our mindset one that says the teacher is large and in charge?

Do we create syllabi filled with rules and regulations that alienate our students? I think many of us want to create a classroom where learning is the central focus and where all students can succeed. We also want to create classrooms that are inclusive, filled with energy, enthusiasm, curiosity, and a sense of true belonging. In order to accomplish this, we need to look at the power we wield in the classroom and determine how we might share power. How we enter the classroom and how we share this space with our students will have a huge impact on how learning will take place. We need as teachers to understand our mental and emotional states, how these influence how we teach and how our students learn (Norell, 2021). It might be that we need to face the reality of sharing power in our classrooms.

Power in the Classroom



Leaders generally gain “referent” power from their social skills, integrity, authenticity, values and other characteristics that make them attractive to others.

Generally, power is understood as the ability to affect people in some ways. In classroom environments, power refers to the ability of teachers to affect the students without the control of students (Mendez & Garcia, 2012). University teachers and other leaders in educational institutions and other areas of life have power conferred by their positions. Power is not inherent but conferred by others. Of course, traditionally, university teachers were seen as content experts and some amount of power was derived from this position. They were considered experts and we might say that they derived power from their expertise in the discipline. Newer research though is showing that some of these traditional understandings are waning (Waldeck, 2017). Many students no longer value “knowledge for the sake of knowledge.”

University teachers are the designated leaders of their courses. As the designated leaders in courses, traditionally they have been seen to derive power from the knowledge/information that they have at their disposal: “content expert” power. This expert power is about students’ perceiving the teacher as being competent and knowledgeable in specific areas (Paulse & Chory-Assad & Dunleavy 2005).

Power sharing in the schools, colleges and universities refers to the process where decisions are made based on the active engagement of student and teachers in the process of decision-making. In most cases, the reference is to that which actually takes place in classrooms. The objective of power sharing is to create opportunities for students to take responsibility for various tasks in the educational environment and in the process, develop their capabilities.

Power Sharing



In teacher-centred classrooms, the teachers wield power in authoritative ways but in learner-centred classrooms, power is shared with students not transferred to them wholesale. This is accomplished by allowing them to participate in the teaching and learning activities and make some decisions. Of course, faculty still make decisions but they do not make all of them.

Teachers can systematically create opportunities for students to share power since this is good for developing autonomous and self-directed learners. However, power must be shared in proportion to the student’s ability to handle it (Weimer, 2013). One example is that offered by Weimer (2013). In a first year sociology class, the students do not have the knowledge and understanding needed to decide on a textbook that might be used in the course. The feeling is that if students were asked to determine the textbook for the course, this would be ethically irresponsible. However, if the teacher surveys several text books and selects five that were considered suitable for the course, meeting the student learning needs and of course, would leading to the realisation of the course objectives, students could then be formed into a textbook review committee, provided with rubrics to identify the characteristics of a good text and as a class tasked with the reviewing the texts, selecting the most suitable one and justify their choice.

In this text book selection exercise, students are given a limited amount of power, and the activity is designed to enable them to make a decision based on evidence. There are other ways to go about sharing power in the classroom. For instance, in some courses, students are able to select their assignments. In fact, there are courses where students can negotiate assignments. Of course, these course are deliberately designed to enable power to be shared by the decision making of the students.

Benefits of Power Sharing



When power is shared in classrooms, there are really positives that redound to the benefits of all parties involved. Students are more motivated and this is important for learning. There is better content connection, a stronger sense of the class as community, and fewer classroom management issues. In this regard, power sharing creates a more positive and constructive classroom.

In classrooms where efforts are made to share power, students operate as if the class now belongs to them and when power is shared, the sense of ownership is advanced. They feel a greater sense of control and more in charge of their learning. This business of entrusting some decision making power to students should not be scoffed at, or resisted considering the benefits that are likely to accrue to the learning community. Chances are there will be less disruptive behaviour in classrooms where this was previously seen.

When students do not feel powerless, they have less reason to challenge authority. Power-sharing redefines the teacher –student relationship, making it less adversarial. Classroom management changes from needing policies that prevent misconduct to a quest for procedures that promote the climate for learning. Teachers also benefit when power is shared. It is a real pleasure to work with students who are less passive, more interested, more motivated and willing to work.



References

Norell, L. (2021, October 18). Transforming classroom culture. The Teaching Professor. <https://www.teachingprofessor.com/topics/classroom-climate/transforming-classroom-culture/>

Méndez, T. & García, A. (2012). Exploring elementary students' power and solidarity relations in an EFL classroom. Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development, 14(1), 173-185.

Paulse, M. L., & Chory-Assad, R. M., & Dunleavy, K. N. (2005). The relationship between student perceptions of instructor power and classroom justice. Communication Research Reports, 22(3), 207-215.

Waldeck, J. H. (2017, November 11). Reflections on teacher power in the contemporary classroom. The Teaching Professor. <https://www.teachingprofessor.com/?p=56048>

Weimer, M. (2013). Learner-centered teaching: Five keys to practice. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Check out our publications at:

mona.uwi.edu/cetl/publications

featuring our monthly Teaching Times newsletters and more.



Click on the icons to visit our pages



876-970-0376



@cetl.mona



@cetlmona



@cetlmona



@cetlmona



mona.uwi.edu/cetl