Collaboration across the Power Line

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Collaboration requires good communication; but when individuals or groups begin working together, they frequently encounter barriers that threaten to subvert their efforts. In the academic community, these barriers may be institutional (e.g., disciplinary divisions), physical (e.g., architectural or geographical factors), or interpersonal (e.g., race or gender distinctions). Roles of authority and power can also pose particular difficulties for collaboration, particularly when the parties include both faculty and students. In what follows, we will examine this troubling barrier to effective collaboration in an effort to understand its dimensions and to learn how to avoid its ill effects. We begin with a vignette, an actual incident in which one of us was involved; this is the reason that it is reported in the first person.

Laura’s face showed panic as she walked into my office, a panic I couldn’t understand. Laura was one of the outstanding students in her first-year class: bright, friendly, popular with both faculty and students. I had wanted to see her because I was planning to set up a student-faculty committee, and her insightful ideas and outspoken nature would make her an effective member. It was an honor to be selected, and I had thought Laura would be pleased.

But before I had a chance to tell her what I had in mind, Laura asked, in a frightened voice, what the matter was. Had she done something wrong? Was there a problem about her grades? Why had I sent for her? When I told her what I wanted, she gasped with relief, then thanked me and said that she would be glad to serve on the committee.

It took Laura and me some time to figure out the sequence of events that caused her anxiety. I had conveyed the message that I needed to see her by way of one of her instructors but had neglected to tell him the reason. He then compounded the problem by announcing at the beginning of class that he had something to say to her afterward. Thus, Laura sat through an entire hour knowing that her instructor “had something to say to her” (rarely the herald of good news), only to be eventually told that she had been summoned by a still higher authority. By the time she reached my office, all she could think about were sinister possibilities.

This very ordinary example illustrates what we call the power line. A simple message, passing across the gulf that separates persons at different levels of authority, becomes distorted; and what was intended to be a collaboration threatens to become a confrontation. The Laura example is especially interesting because there were two power lines, each adding to the distortion of the message.

Learning and Teaching Together

Power line problems are so disruptive to the process that some writers (Kail 1983, Kail and Trimbur 1987) have argued that collaboration can occur only when all of the individuals involved are at the same level of authority. We take a less pessimistic view. Our experience convinces us not only that collaborating across the power line is possible, but that it constitutes an especially effective form of education.

To begin with, an individual’s level of authority may not be constant. If a police officer enrolls in a course I am teaching, our relations are quite different in the classroom from what they would be if the same officer stopped me for a traffic infraction. Power, like knowledge, is a social construct; and like all social constructs, it is not static. Although it is certainly true that learners and teachers have different roles and levels of power (and thus different kinds of authority), it is a basic tenet of collaborative education that everyone concerned is both a learner and a teacher. This holds true even when one of the individuals is an undergraduate and the other holds a Ph.D. Thus, the task of collaboration involves the creation and continual redefinition of authority structures among the participants.

The conception of authority as a dynamic construct is unfamiliar in most academic spheres; and this contributes to the discomfort that often attends an alliance across the power line. Particularly in the case of undergraduate students, authority tends to be seen as a static feature inherent in certain individuals (professors) and not in others (students). Moving from this notion to
recognizing that authority is dynamic and shared is an essential step toward the bridging of the power line.

Students often experience a particularly sharp jolt to their understanding as this transition takes place, a jolt that we have called the shock of responsibility. This transition and its jarring nature can be illustrated through another vignette.

Kathy was an undergraduate who had been a member of a faculty-student team that had designed an interdisciplinary course during a summer. In the following year, when the course was being offered for the first time, some of the students enrolled in it approached Kathy with complaints about the way the course was being taught. They found the instructor to be domineering and aloof, spending most of the class time on lectures and not encouraging the dialogue among students that the course was intended to provide. Kathy faced a dilemma: having worked with this professor during the course development stage, she believed the students' complaints were valid. Yet she felt intimidated by the professor's authority and was reluctant to confront him.

Caught between this authority and the authority defined by the intent of the course, which she had helped to fashion, Kathy experienced a cognitive transformation that helped her to find her own authority. Whereas she had previously looked upon the course design project as an interesting part of her own education, she was now confronted by the fact that it was more than that, that it was a course, a part of other students' education. She now saw her role as one of the designers of the course as being not just the role of a learner, but also that of an educator, and she felt a responsibility toward what she now regarded as "her" students.

Kathy had difficulty finding a means to express her new-found authority. The professor continued to view authority in a static sense; and although he recognized both the authority of his own expertise and that defined by the intent of the course, he regarded himself, as instructor, as the locus of both authorities and was resistant to Kathy's attempts to communicate her own concerns. Eventually, Kathy turned to the director of the course development project as a mediator, feeling (correctly) that this professor would be more receptive to suggestions if they came from a source that he perceived as a still higher authority. (There were other power relationships involved in this episode beside academic status. The fact that Kathy was a woman, whereas the project director was a man, may have also contributed to the fact that the male professor more readily accepted suggestions from the latter.)

In addition to illustrating the shock of responsibility, Kathy's story points out another essential point. Collaborating across the power line is like the tango: it takes two. In the above example, the student had come to a better understanding of the dynamics of authority than had the professor, which members had been outspoken in their hopes that the students would consider themselves colleagues rather than pupils of the professors.

Toward the end of the meeting, Tom spoke up, somewhat hesitantly, to ask how the students should address the faculty. "We're used to calling you folks 'Dr. . . .'", but I think that's going to get in the way of collegiality," he said. "But I don't feel entirely comfortable using your first names either." Tom's question pinpointed a token of authority that threatened to become a barrier to collaboration; but it also unlocked the group's process, allowing it to move away

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Perhaps it is because the dynamic nature of authority is unsettling that cultures create signs and tokens to designate authority structures. These tokens may be tangible, for example, a police officer's badge, the elevated bench from which judges preside in a courtroom, or the caps and gowns that professors wear on ceremonial occasions, but they are often more subtle. Most administrators know that the power structure behind an exchange among persons is significantly defined by the arrangement of furniture, and they frequently design their offices so that they can choose to address a visitor from behind the desk to emphasize their authority or to sit beside the visitor to understate that authority.

Body language often serves to delineate power lines, as do moves of address.

Tom, a junior at a liberal arts college, was participating in a curricular development project somewhat like Kathy's. Four students and five faculty members had been assembled to design a new course; they planned to meet weekly during one semester. The first meeting was devoted to defining the structure of the group and outlining its mission, and the faculty from the posturing and speechmaking with which it had begun and to start to tackle the dynamics of authority that collaboration uncovers.

The group discussed Tom's problem and collectively decided to agree to use first names. More importantly, this event served as a model for other confrontations with difficulties in the group's process as it worked at its task. Indeed, Tom adopted the role of "process mediator" within the group, often interrupting to point out a difficulty in the dynamics that was impeding progress.

But these symbols of power are also the parameters of an authority that can impede, inhibit, or paralyze a student's ability to claim his or her own voice. When students and faculty work together on research projects that affect course design, we have found that the extent of genuine collaboration depends on the negotiation of authority. In some situations, the work remains cooperative, where the emphasis is on helping the other. The student grows and learns productively, but the process enables the student to feel the faculty authority. The student might report, for example, that "it mattered to the professor what I thought, what articles were most significant." The student may claim that it was exciting to discover that "he relied on my judgment" as
they talked about new material. But the authority in these situations continues to reside in the faculty member, who if not perceived as omnipotent and omniscient, is certainly seen as the possessor of knowledge and power.

**The Shock of Responsibility**

The transition from cooperation to collaboration may be said to occur when the authority in the situation is redefined. This redefinition is often accompanied by the abrupt cognitive shift that was previously described as the shock of responsibility. At that point, one begins to construct, more or less consciously, one’s own knowledge and recognizes one’s own authority in the process. Because there are now two individual authorities negotiating a joint responsibility for the project, the situation becomes truly collaborative.

The shock of responsibility, especially when it occurs for the first time, is a cognitive reorientation of sufficient magnitude that often is fully appreciated only in retrospect, as is shown by Keith’s experience.

Keith had participated in a bibliographic research project during the summer, in collaboration with one of his professors. In writing about the experience, he stated, “Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the work during the summer was the extent to which it made possible a reciprocal relation to a professor. Professor Y obviously had a good idea of where he wanted to look for texts, in which time periods, by which authors, if not in which books, yet he gave me equal responsibility in making the final selections from these sources, and encouraged me to make suggestions from areas with which I was more familiar that he had not yet included that might add to the course.”

Several months later, after having helped teach the course that he had helped to create, Keith’s view had changed.

In retrospect I feel that I did not take him up on this offer to the extent that I could have, often making suggestions but deferring to him for final decisions. “After all it is his course, he’s got to teach it: it is ultimately his decision, right?” Well, yes and no. It was, of course, his class, and primarily his responsibility to teach it, but should this have kept me from being as opinionated and insistent as another professor would have been? Ultimately, I think the research might have been more dynamic if I had been more opinionated and trusted that Professor Y would appreciate a more rigorous challenge to his agenda than I at times provided.

Repeatedly we have been asked by faculty members whether we are suggesting that by collaborating they should reduce themselves to the level of their students—or, as one faculty member put it, “Are you telling me that I should forgo my authority in the classroom?” In exploring the answer, we need to unpack the meanings bound up in the word authority. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives three major meanings to the term. The first is authority as a power to enforce obedience and the second is a power to influence action, opinion, or belief. Both of these describe authority as a power that restrains, directs, or controls others. The significance lies in the verbs enforce and influence.

The third meaning is a capacity to inspire belief (as with the weight of testimony or evidence). This definition, revolving around the verb inspire seems to correlate best with what we mean by authority in academic settings, namely, learnedness: the combination of knowledge acquired and experience expressed, usually through the written word. Indeed, the word authority has the same root as author, and both may be traced back ultimately to the Latin root auregere, meaning to augment or to induce growth.

When a faculty member collaborates with a student, he or she needs to be conscious of the distinction between the organic authority rooted in knowledge and inherent in one’s person and the authority of power that the condition of being learned gives one over others. It is the latter that has the most negative potential for collaboration between faculty and students because educational goals involve drawing forth from students their own knowledge and understanding and empowering them.

But there is a negative potential for the faculty member, as well, namely the authority itself. As one A. Collins asked in 1724 (quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*), “Is there anything that stifies the light of truth but authority?” For the person cloaked in the mantle of authority, the very same power line that defines authority may simultaneously serve to exclude a student from his or her intellectual development and to restrict the growth of the authority. In the process, the authority of the faculty member also becomes diminished. (For an exploration of this process see Jessica Benjamin’s book, *The Bonds of Love*.)

In order for the authority to sustain its meaning in the social context, it must be able to grow, to adapt, and to change (augere) in response to new knowledge and conditions. The key to the continual growth of anyone’s learnedness or authority is the ability to be continually open to new ideas and to return to what might be called the condition of suspended knowing. The characteristic feature of this state of suspended knowing is receptivity, the capacity to receive another’s authority (see Noddings 1984, 30–35).

There are similarities between our use of authority (in the augere sense) and the concept of voice as it is used in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986). The possessor of voice has a tool that can be used both to influence and to inspire. As is the case with authority, voice is initially perceived as something outside the knower, something possessed by powerful others but not, for example, by someone in the stage of “received knowledge.” Acquisition of voice accompanies a profound cognitive transformation in which the newly
found capacity to speak—to have authorship—gives legitimacy and potency—authority—to that which is said. The notion of authorship is more commonly associated with the written word, whereas voice is associated with the spoken word. We are not certain whether this is a fundamental or a superficial difference.

Dialogue of Authority

Finally, the analogy with voice may make it easier to understand what we mean when we speak of suspending one’s own authority while working with others. It means something akin to silencing one’s own voice in order to hear other voices. Just as a knower who has developed a unique voice need not lose that voice in order to listen to another, one who has developed an authority does not abandon that authority while collaborating but merely silences it while absorbing the authority of another or while constructing a new group authority. Thus, we might speak of a “dialogue of authority” that takes place between collaborative knowers. This dialogue of authority can be seen as forming one dimension of the “conversation of mankind” as described by Kenneth Bruffee (1984).

When this dialogue fails, usually because one party is unable to silence his or her own authority and assume a state of suspended knowledge, the result is a fumbling and warped collaborative process that might be compared to attempting to dance with a partner whose shoelaces are tied together. In the following example, the faculty member gained richly from the collaboration, but by failing to understand the collaborative process, he deprived the student of recognition of her role in generating new authority, that is, he deprived her of voice.

Sandra had collaborated with Professor Z over a summer, working on a revision of a course. Sandra had brought experience and intellectual interests quite different from Professor Z’s; indeed, that was one of the reasons he had asked for her collaboration. The project director had met with each of them at the end of the summer to determine their reactions to the experience. Sandra reported that the work had been fruitful in some ways, but that she had found it frustrating. She had learned a great deal and had worked incredibly hard; she reported that she couldn’t remember ever becoming so immersed in a topic. The frustration arose from the fact that she and Professor Z approached topics in very different ways. She described him as a more abstract and theoretical thinker than she was herself.

The professor reported that the student had done good work. He observed that while he knew her to be “of average intelligence,” he had picked her because of her enthusiasm and that had worked out well. After discussing the project, the conversation touched sociably on the faculty member’s other work during the summer. He responded with delight, reporting that he had come up with a new idea, which he had recently presented to his colleagues. They had reacted well, and he thought it was one of his best ideas in a long time. He then mentioned, in passing, that the idea had arisen in a conversation with Sandra. The project director asked whether he had told Sandra about this. He replied that he had not but meant to do so eventually.

In this situation, the student certainly learned richly; but being told weeks later, after the fact, how she had contributed to generating knowledge was not the same as being acknowledged as a collaborator. Although her cognitive development had been substantial, she had been excluded from sharing in the mutual generation of knowledge from their intellectual alliance, to the detriment of her own development of authority and voice. Such shared moments are among the great delights and rewards of joint inquiry. Beyond that, they show that out of the combination arises not just what chemists would call a mixture but a transformation into a compound. Perhaps an even better metaphor is that of nuclear fusion to describe the explosive energy that such a process generates, stimulating both participants to a renewed commitment to inquiry as well as to a respect for the humanity that unites us. In contrast to the above example, the following vignette quotes a student who reports that being acknowledged as a collaborative partner enabled her own growth and generated within her both the pride of ownership and the recognition of her new authority.

The weekly meetings were the high point of my summer. When I walked through that door, I was somebody. We spread our materials out side by side on a conference table in a neutral discussion room, effectively eliminating the conventional authoritative atmosphere of a professor sitting behind his desk, in his swivel chair in his office peering across at a powerless student. Then we would open our minds, ears, and voices and engage in a kind of exchange that was quite unlike anything I had ever participated in before.

The professor truly listened to what I had to say and was genuinely interested in my opinions and thoughts. If we both started to speak at once or I started to open my mouth but hesitated before actually expressing what I was thinking, he actively encouraged me to go ahead and speak. . . . With that in mind I went home many times after a meeting feeling very proud and confident in my intellectual capabilities. It is remarkable that I felt that much difference in self-esteem, considering that I never seemed to be lacking in self-confidence in the academic arena to begin with. If I experienced such a boost in my self-perceptions, imagine what a student who had not had the constant reassurances of a traditionally successful academic career could gain from such an interaction with a faculty member. Given the equality in our relationship during this collaboration in the face of the disparity in our educational backgrounds, I have realized that ideas come from minds, not from full bookcases and degrees.

The student who participates in genuine collaboration with a faculty member transcends the barrier of the power line. Once this barrier has been breached, other power lines will be less constraining. Thus, overcoming the power line is more than just a learning experience. It transforms the nature of learning and simultaneously constructs a lasting authority. The process epitomizes the

REFERENCES


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