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Assumptions Versus Theories in Studies of Classroom Authority

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Abstract

This paper examines theoretical frameworks in four studies of authority in the classroom. One study, Pace (2003), is chosen as an exemplar of qualitative research on authority for four reasons: 1. In-depth definition of the term *authority*; 2. A broad overview of theoretical and ideological approaches; 3. A historical overview to provide a context for the current study and to indicate why the topic is currently interesting; 4. A reading of the data that allows multiple perspectives. Three studies are critiqued according to these criteria, producing the general conclusion that each study holds implicit views of authority that the theoretical frameworks fail to account for. The four criteria are claimed to be useful for elucidating a concept of authority from which an adequate theoretical framework can grow.

Introduction: Theoretical Approaches in Three Studies

Approaching a qualitative study on classroom authority, what are some criteria from which the adequacy of a theoretical framework may be judged?

This is a critical analysis of the theoretical frameworks used in three qualitative studies which deal with classroom authority. The studies I have chosen to critique are: Lutz & Fuller (2007), "Exploring authority: A case study of a composition and a professional writing classroom"; Razfar (2005), "Language ideologies in practice: Repair and classroom discourse"; and Wootton-Don (2000), "Authority Discourse: An examination of one classroom's authority structure". In addition, I draw upon Pace (2003), "Revisiting classroom authority: Theory and ideology meet practice" as an exemplar of what I consider a well-rounded, nuanced theoretical approach to the study of classroom authority. The studies are henceforth referred to as Lutz & Fuller, Razfar, Wootton-Don, and Pace.

In short, the theoretical approaches used in the three studies are as follows. Lutz & Fuller consider authority in the classroom something to be minimized or "abnegated" (p. 201) toward the goal of an egalitarian, "decentered" (p. 202) classroom. They state: "We were influenced by such thinkers as Freire (1970), Weiler (1988), and Herndl (1993), who had framed resistance to pedagogies of oppression as the only ethical, conscionable position for a teacher. Even though we acknowledged the limitations of applying these theories in our contexts, separately, we came to believe along with much of the profession that a decentered classroom that more actively involves students in the administration of the class and in the ebb and flow of its conversations is one of the best ways to construct an equitable learning environment for developing student writers" (p.202).

Razfar takes a similarly contrary view of authority, and interprets classroom discourse data by way of a model that takes language as necessarily ideological, and in which authority is enacted linguistically. In her words:

"[T]he hegemony of mainstream dominant relations to language assumes that students of linguistic minority groups are to passively assimilate the language forms that are the target of instruction. An ideological model of linguistic and

discourse functions calls for a fundamental reorientation of this perspective whereby linguistic form, context, and relations of power are necessarily embedded within interaction frames..." (p. 405).

Wootton-Don does not use the words *model*, *theory*, *framework*, or related terms, but describes the study as an inquiry into "classroom authority as a discourse, a system of signs" (p. 2). The study, she claims, "demonstrates the degree of internalization of authority structures" (p. 2) as discovered through ethnographic inquiry:

"I sought to examine authority in the specific and local sense, to look at the 'authority discourse' in a college composition class in order to understand how the instructor's authority manifests itself and how the students respond to those manifestations..." (p. 2).

Basic Critique: Lack of Interpretive Power

Each of these studies finds fault with ("problematizes") classroom authority: Lutz & Fuller lament, "Even conscious attempts to shed and renegotiate power are *thwarted* by the need for someone to take charge" (italics added, p. 203). Razfar claims: "[N]on-critical approaches are neither neutral, nor necessarily benign" (p. 405). Wootton-Don warns: "[I]nternalization of an authority relationship... by its very nature will restrict [students] as writers" (p. 4). No evidence or arguments are offered to explain why someone taking charge, using non-critical approaches to language teaching, or internalizing authority are necessarily undesirable. The problem with authority, according to these studies, is evidently a matter of more versus less.

Lutz & Fuller provide an example of a general presumptive tenor: "We came to believe along with much of the profession that...[our point of view is good]" (p. 202). Thus a popular belief provides all necessary justification. True, their claims are in keeping with their theoretical perspectives, but the interpretive lenses are not set at a sufficiently wide angle. Perhaps the authors take for granted alternative views and explanations as going without saying, as for example, "traditional viewpoints" that everyone knows (and of course everyone knows new-and-different can only be better than the same-old-thing).

It has been said, "we do not first see, and then define; we define first, and then see" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 61). That is, everyone brings preconceptions to observations and analyses. Perhaps the main difference between a layperson and an expert concerns openness to and awareness of possible interpretations. We generally consider the layperson's preconceptions to be narrow, limited *assumptions*, while we expect the expert's preconceptions to be well-rounded and nuanced *theories*. The main shortcoming of the theoretical approaches in each of the three studies critiqued here is a lack of interpretive power; their *authority is a problem because it contradicts the egalitarian ideal* premise permits a lack of depth, breadth, and nuance in their conceptions of authority, and therefore a lack of clear distinction between theory and assumption.

A Detailed Critique: Four Criteria

Judith Pace provides an example of a study of classroom authority that presents a well-rounded and highly nuanced conception of authority and employs a theoretical framework that allows sufficient space for interpretation of data. Discussing her analysis of ethnographic data she collected in two high school classrooms, Pace writes:

"The complicated dynamics I witnessed did not fit authority constructs described in the sociological literature; thus, they demanded new explanations. Kliebard's (1986) history of conflicting curricular ideologies in the early 1900s and the resulting hybridized curriculum, combined with Swidler's (1986, 2001) discussion of ideology and common sense, provided tools to understand this complexity" (p. 1561).

Note the recognition of authority constructs as complex, requiring combined theories from diverse sources. Note also that authority is not to be problematized as a simple matter of more versus less. Rather, Pace argues that authority is manifested in social constructions, and as such, enactments of authority are

"ambiguous hybrids of traditional, bureaucratic, professional, and egalitarian relations. They are shaped by commonsense responses to the paradoxical cultures of schooling and society, rather than well-articulated, jointly held understandings of educational means and ends" (p. 1561).

An adequate theoretical framework in the study of classroom authority grows from an adequate conception of authority. From Pace I draw four criteria that seem to constitute a conception of authority that permits more interpretive power in observation (collecting data) and analysis (interpreting data). These are: 1. An in-depth definition of the term *authority*; 2. A broad overview of theoretical and ideological approaches to the study of authority in the classroom; 3. A historical overview to provide a context for the current study and to indicate why the topic is currently interesting; 4. A reading of the data that allows multiple perspectives -- or at least equal time to opposing interpretations. In the remainder of this paper, I will explain these four elements, and then apply them to a critique of the three studies under discussion.

1. *An in-depth definition of the term authority*

In the layperson's view (it is reasonable to speak of the average person because everyone by virtue of birth has had experience with authority), on one hand, having authority is "being in charge" (as the "proper authorities" are vested with power to enforce law); on the other hand, authority is competence (as in, "Dr. Smithers is a renowned authority on butterflies"). Ideally -- I dare say according to the average person's ideals -- a person in authority will possess both attributes. In short: Authority is something possessed by certain people in certain situations by virtue of conferred status, power, or competence that grants a measure of control of a situation and over the people under authority.

There are yet many layers of subtlety here. How is authority legitimated? Is compliance with authority the same as consent? How does authority become problematic?

Pace & Hemmings (2006) look to three classic types of legitimacy described by Max Weber, and a fourth by Talcott Parsons. There is (1) *traditional authority* legitimized by long-established norms; (2) *charismatic authority* which depends on certain attractive personal qualities that inspire commitment; (3) *bureaucratic authority* in which offices are established by rationality, rules, and regulations; and there is (4) *professional authority*, which involves "the use of individuals' expertise to achieve consensual aims" -- Pace & Hemmings assert that in this role, "teachers' command of

subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills are their most important claim to legitimacy" (2006, p. 3).

A mere claim to legitimacy doesn't guarantee that people will follow the leader. There is the question of being forced and giving consent. By and large, people will give tacit consent to authority as to rules and norms simply because it seems the right thing to do, and -- for the same reasons supermarkets don't post signs on the walls saying, "Buy Products; Do Not Steal Them" -- in many situations, it doesn't occur to people to question authority (Elster, 1989; Wolff, 1999). There is a moral order, a duty to follow rules and norms, and a right conferred on those in authoritative roles to be followed (Metz, 1978). It is as natural as breathing, and usually as out-of-awareness.

Authority is problematic because it entails power, and power can corrupt. Yet authority "must be distinguished from power, which is the ability to compel compliance, either through the use or the threat of force" (Wolff, 1999, p. 64). Children, I think, have a sense of when authority is enacted from consent or from force when they say a teacher is "nice" or "mean". By these terms, they may also be referring to a predilection for certain teacherly methods of maintaining control: *Coercion* -- the threat of punishment to make students do what they don't want to do; *exchange* -- incentives offered in exchange for students' cooperation; and *influence* -- persuasion enacted through a personal relationship between teacher and student. (Pace & Hemmings, 2006).

Pace & Hemmings conceptualize authority in a way that "challenges a number of misconceptions, such as the view that authority is synonymous with coercive power, something that teachers possess, enforceable through top-down sanctions, or equivalent to discipline" (2006, p. 1). A summary of the essence of classroom authority by Pace & Hemmings (2006) is quoted here:

1. Classroom authority in its truest form depends on teachers' legitimacy, students' consent, and a moral order consisting of shared purposes, values, and norms.
2. Authority is multiple in its forms and types and the ways in which it is interpreted.
3. Authority is enacted through dynamic negotiations between teachers and students that often involve overt or subtle conflict.
4. Authority is situated in various arenas -- such as curricula and classroom discourse -- and is shaped by multiple interacting influences, including various perspectives on educational purposes, values, and norms; school ethos and policy; teachers' knowledge; institutional features of schooling; and historical content.
5. Authority is consequential for classroom life, students' achievement, teachers' work, and democracy." (p. 2)

The commonsense criterion for evaluating authority in the classroom is whether the observed interaction adds up to an orderly situation in which learning can take place. But what does "orderly" mean, and how is learning measured? This depends on the observer's assumptions and opinions -- or, in academic terms, theories and ideologies.

2. A broad overview of theoretical and ideological approaches to the study of authority in the classroom

Pace defines a spectrum of social theories of authority, their related educational ideologies and curriculum models in American culture as follows:

Social theory of authority	Educational ideology	Curriculum model
Traditional	Conservative	Humanist
Legal-rational	Bureaucratic	Social efficiency
Expert professional	Progressive	Developmental
Absence of authority	Radical	Social meliorist

(adapted from Pace, 2003, p. 1561)

These theories and ideologies may be reckoned as a continuum from Conservative -- in which authority necessarily persists because human nature is imperfectible, to Radical -- in which authority will ultimately be unnecessary because human nature is perfectible. This is consistent with works in political philosophy (e.g., Sowell, 1987; Edmunton, 1999).

3. A historical overview to provide a context for the current study and to indicate why the topic is currently interesting

Pace writes:

"From 1960 to 1980, an unprecedented shift in authority relations in U.S. high schools took place that emerged from social and political transformation. Americans questioned all forms of authority, demanded equal rights for marginalized groups, protested the Vietnam War, and rejected conventional mores. The courts granted students new rights to freedom of expression (*Tinker v. Des Moines* in 1969) and due process (*Goss v. Lopez* in 1975). As a result, disciplinary procedures in high schools and classrooms were restricted... Authority shifted from traditional, *in loco parentis* relations toward a progressive, professional model. Educationists in the 1960s such as Silberman (1969), Kohl (1967), and Featherstone (1971) advocated limiting the scope of authority to educational matters and claimed teachers' professional expertise, namely the ability to educate youth, as its source of legitimacy" (p. 1562).

Thus the theoretical and ideological continuum may also be taken to represent a shift in corresponding viewpoints over time.

The educationists cited above may have had compelling arguments and evidence for the models of education they favored, but as with all academic discussions concerning social policy, which model is the favorite of the day is nonetheless a matter of perspective. If it were a matter of things getting better and better, we'd have entered paradise long ago. Succeeding generations of academics come of age in an ideological environment, and for better or worse, that environment becomes the default value and the measure of things. Studies of authority should pay attention to the larger sweep of history, to see whether the researcher is caught up in it, or is able to view it from the ground.

4. A reading of the data that allows multiple perspectives -- or at least equal time to opposing interpretations

This final criterion is a summary of the three preceding. To expand on the term *authority*, and to hold the observed data up to broad theoretical, ideological, and historical perspectives, is to add rigor to a study's treatment, to flesh out the concept of

authority, and to widen the theoretical lens. I turn now to a critique of three studies along the lines of the above four criteria.

Lutz & Fuller (2007), "Exploring authority: A case study of a composition and a professional writing classroom"

1. Lutz & Fuller's preferred definition of authority is from Mortensen & Kirsch (1993), i.e., authority as a *negotiation* between parties within a community context. The possibility of de facto structures of authority as social necessity is problematized, as noted earlier. Power is something which must be shared, and hierarchy must be minimized:

"When we began this study, we agreed that authority resides in the person(s) who have the power and control in the classroom and that decentering, or minimizing authority, meant attempting both to minimize the inherent hierarchy of the traditional classroom and to share and negotiate, as much as possible, our inherent authority with our students. (p. 203)"

2. Lutz & Fuller reveal their ideological orientation with this quote from Brunner (1991):

"Traditional methods of instruction depend on passive rather than active learning, acceptance of what is taught rather than questioning, and, in short, complete submission to authority. Who owns the knowledge in traditional classes is apparent, and students are sure it is not them. Under such a system, students learn powerlessness..." (in Lutz & Fuller 2007. p. 203).

Lutz & Fuller apparently find in this quote sufficient evidence to proceed from the premise that traditional methods lead to passivity, which leads to "complete submission" and learned powerlessness. Therefore, the authors conclude that they should seek ways to relinquish at least some of their authority in the classroom.

3. Lutz & Fuller do not situate their study of authority in historical context except to set their concept of "decentered" (non-authoritarian) pedagogy in contrast to "traditionalist thinking" that focuses on "rigid conceptions of truth and facts" and "reliance on linear and hierarchical representations" (p. 204, quoting Wilson, 2001). A historical context would be useful here in asking questions such as: Have "decentered" methods been tried in the past? How have they fared? What can we learn from history?

4. Out of twenty-two pages, Lutz & Fuller devote all but the following quote to a negative definition of classroom authority. They call this an "opposing view" (quoting Martin, 1992):

"There is some real value to some of what a university can teach, and... some teachers know what this is better than some students. What follows from this [positioning] is that our job is not mainly to facilitate discussion, creativity, and freedom; it's to teach students what they don't already know" (p. 204).

Razfar (2005), "Language ideologies in practice: Repair and classroom discourse"

1. Razfar explains: "This article illustrates that the practice of *repair* can serve as an index of cultural authority and power thus making it an ideological practice" (p. 405). The term *authority* is not defined, but appears twenty-seven times in the article in the following collocations:

authority and power

status, legitimacy, authority, and power
 authority to perform... the act of correcting linguistic form [authority to repair]
 epistemic authority [claim to authoritative knowledge]
 authority to make meaning
 authority of proper language
 authority and cultural privilege
 cultural authority
 authority: the linguistic rights of repair
 social authority
 legitimate authority
 authority as a teacher to define the "correct" form
 the authority and the right

The term is basically synonymous with power. The "ideological practice" of concern here is to wield authority/power in such a way as to offend the sensitivities of students. A paragraph or two explaining specifically why authority is in a negative light, or whether there is a difference between consent and coercion would help the case.

2. Razfar's ideology appears to be Radical, with a distinct sense of grievance: "As the literature shows, accents serve as markers of group membership (class, ethnicity, nationality, level of education, etc.). Wolfenstein (1993, p. 331) says, 'Languages have skin colors. There are white nouns and verbs, white grammar and white syntax. In the absence of challenges to linguistic hegemony, indeed language is white. If you don't speak white you will not be heard, just as when you don't look white you will not be seen.'" (p. 411)

"Literature shows" accent markers denoting group membership, but literature also shows that accents, grammar, and word choice also change according to the setting and situation. Certainly there are situations in which one "not speaking white" will be heard. Razfar makes no attempt to separate the emotional content -- setting aside any question of its merit -- from the linguistically interesting content. Is this quote applicable to the whole country? A community? A few people? Or is this intended as hyperbole?

3. There's no history here except the mention of a 1973 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights study referenced to bolster the assertion that views of teachers regarding non-native speakers of English as "deficient" in their language ability has led to inequities for learners. Thus Razfar draws upon the weight of Civil Rights legislation to emphasize the importance of her objections to the ways language teachers correct their students.

4. If Razfar had been making a conscious attempt to present a reasonable opposing view, she might have called upon linguist Anna Wierzbicka (2006): "Community is created through communication, in a discourse which uses linguistic patterns and discursive conventions whose nature and manner of use are agreed on or authorized by those who go to make up the community... Not to know and control these patterns and conventions is to remain outside of the community they define, to be characterized as an 'other' who has neither the entitlement nor the ability to participate actively in it" (p. 17).

Wootton-Don (2000), "Authority Discourse: An examination of one classroom's authority structure"

1. Wootton-Don seeks to "examine authority in the specific and local sense" in a college composition class, as opposed to dealing with "authority in the theoretical, abstract sense" (p. 2), and yet the word *authority* is not specifically defined. The study's findings list percentages of instructor commands ("...there was an average of 7.1 commands per class", p. 2) and student statements about attitudes toward the teacher ("Most students had a sense of the instructor 'watching' and judging them, despite characterizing the instructor as 'easygoing' or 'laid back'...", p. 3). By inference, therefore, "authority structure" is a set of rules about who gets to command whom; and the researcher's "examination" involves finding out how the subordinates feel about this authority structure.

2. Wootton-Don mentions theoretical perspectives only to say that "numerous writers have proposed... new conceptions of classroom authority..." and that this study intends to confront the realities of what actually goes on in the classroom (p. 2). What students actually do, as it turns out, is "carry on the academic status quo" through the internalization of authority structures (p. 4). Wootton-Don concludes that this is problematic. Having internalized "a pattern of trusting and following authority" and propensities to "respond readily to indirect commands", the students are restricted as writers:

These students were encouraged to speak and think freely in class, but few raised challenging ideas, and in the absence of instruction in how to express strong opinions -- or a requirement to do so -- they fell back on cautious, conventional writing" (p. 4).

Thus an ideal is assumed, but not justified.

3. The data in this study was collected over the period of one semester, dates unknown. No historical grounding -- as in political and economic climate, background of the school, changes in operating procedures, prior coursework of the students -- is given. The reader is left to assume that such background is not relevant. An orientation to progress and a sense that change is preferable to the way things currently are is revealed. For example, having established that the students' "goal is to carry on the academic status quo", the author suggests that "renegotiating authority relationships is a far more formidable task than previous writers have recognized" (p. 4). Without elaboration on what is wrong in academia that such "renegotiating" is necessary, it is unclear why this study is currently interesting.

4. What does the data say? Without a clear definition of authority, without explicit reference to theoretical frameworks, and with only a vague sense of historical setting, can the data simply speak for itself? The author sets out to reveal what actually happens in the classroom, but such a revelation must pass through the theoretical and ideological filter of the author -- a stance that is evident in words chosen and questions asked. Note the following excerpts and the evaluative language used:

(a) "The students... responded promptly and without question to the instructor's 'commands', *even* when they had been given no purpose for a particular task or activity..." (italics added, p. 3).

(b) "[Four students] *went so far as to* equate questioning an instructor about an assignment's purpose with disrespectful behavior" (italics added, p. 3).

(c) "Most students had a sense of the instructor 'watching' and judging them, *despite* characterizing the instructor as 'easygoing' or 'laid back'..." (italics added, p. 3).

(d) "The arguments [in students' papers] were *safe, not extreme*, with more space devoted to the work of experts than to the students' own analysis and ideas" (italics added, p. 3)

The italicized words are clues to the author's implicit ideals, i.e.: (a) Students should question the teacher's purpose in assigning a task or activity, (b) values of respectful behavior are secondary to values of questioning the teacher's purposes, (c) watching and judging is not compatible with being easygoing or laid back, and (d) extreme arguments are preferable to safe arguments -- the former being closer to a student's "own analysis and ideas". In sum, the assumption here is that *authority should be challenged*, and the data show that these students fail to challenge authority to the detriment of their development as creative and original writers. This assumption is supported by no more than the suggestion that this is what the data show.

Conclusion

The shortcomings of the three studies analyzed here may be summed up in the analysis that the writers approached their subject with notions of how things *should be* and not *as they are*. They apply not only explicit theories, but also implicit assumptions, and make no attempts to synthesize conflicting perspectives. *The way things are* is messy, complex, and contradictory. Within this view, there is a multitude of ideas about *the way things should be*, but before one course of action among many can be chosen, there need be at least some discussion about why the other courses are not chosen.

In approaching a qualitative study on classroom authority, I prefer for the reasons discussed here to apply a well-rounded, nuanced conception of authority. This is the root from which an adequate theoretical framework grows.

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