COMMUNICATING INSTRUCTOR POWER ONLINE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

Julie Watts, University of Wisconsin-Stout

ABSTRACT

Understanding how power is communicated by instructors and students is important to student motivation and learning. To examine how power is communicated online by instructors and how receptive (or not) students are to this, I examined four online graduate seminars using two analytical tools: community of inquiry (COI) theory and McCroskey and Richmond's (1983) five bases of power framework. To communicate power, instructors drew from expert, referent, and legitimate power bases to cultivate teaching and social presence and to help students acquire cognitive presence. Direct instruction, feedback, and tools such as the syllabus and discussion board helped instructors communicate power.

Keywords: *online teaching, community of inquiry, power*

INTRODUCTION

Research about power in the classroom—the ways instructors communicate influence, to what extent students are motivated, and how students exert power themselves—has been a compelling area of study since the 1980s (Golish & Olson, 2000; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Sidelinger et al., 2012). Understanding how power is communicated is important. Instructors who do so successfully not only are perceived positively by students but also perceived as experts (Turman & Schrodt, 2006). Instructors who communicate power to students unconvincingly—or worse, in an off-putting or even hostile manner—stymie learning (Richmond, 1990). Instructors who understand which behaviors and messages are most motivating to students are better able to enact appropriate pedagogies (Finn, 2012). Crucially, instructors who communicate power in ways students find receptive help students learn and succeed, even in difficult courses (Micari & Pazos, 2012). Over four decades of research demonstrates that instructors who understand how power circulates in their classrooms can use that knowledge to improve teaching and learning.

Despite these developments, research about power has focused primarily on synchronous verbal and nonverbal communication occurring in face-to-face classrooms. Few studies examine how power is communicated in online learning environments (Anderson, 2006; Garrison & Baynton, 1987). To map how power is communicated online by instructors and how receptive (or not) students are to these communications of power, I use two analytical tools: community of inquiry (COI) theory (Garrison et al., 1999) and McCroskey and Richmond's (1983) five bases of power framework. COI helps me to parse out the ways instructors and students are present in online classes—how their activities and messages help shape teaching and learning—while the five bases enable me to analyze these activities and messages to understand how instructors communicate power through them and to what degree students are receptive.

Developed for online learning environments, COI is useful for this study because it examines how participants are present and highlights how various iterations of student and instructor presences are or are not conducive to "deep and meaningful learning" (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009, p. 23). Three lenses—cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence—help identify and assess instructor and student behaviors and communication. Cognitive presence is characterized by students' sustained interaction with, reflection about, and application of course material: students

"question their existing assumptions" and need to "construct" and apply "new knowledge" (Stewart, 2017, p. 71). Social presence, accomplished through meaningful interaction with peers and the instructor, fosters cognitive presence (Oztok & Brett, 2011). Teaching presence is achieved through thoughtful course design, discourse facilitation among community members, direct instruction, and feedback about student work (Shea et al., 2010).

While COI helps to reveal instructor and student presence in online learning environments, it does so without acknowledging the ways power is communicated and how power necessarily impacts presence and consequently a student's ability to learn. Using French and Raven (1968), McCroskey and Richmond (1983) identified five power bases that instructors draw upon to communicate power. Two bases—*coercive* and *reward* power—adopt the threat of punishment or reward to garner influence. *Legitimate* power is designated in that "[i]t stems from the assigned role of the teacher in the classroom . . . [and] is based on the student's perception that the teacher has the right to make certain demands and requests as a function of her/his position as 'teacher'" (p. 177). *Expert* power is based on whether students perceive the instructor to be "competent and knowledgeable" (p. 177). *Referent* power is possible when students identify with the instructor, and when the instructor builds relationships with students and is adept at "communicating student identification" (Turman & Schrodt, 2006, p. 268).

In this case study, I use these theories to examine how power was communicated in four online graduate seminars (OGSs), and I responded to these research questions:

How do instructors communicate power in OGSs?

How do students perceive and respond to these communications of power?

To what extent are features of power associated with COI cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence?

Not only does investigating how power is communicated relative to cognitive, teaching, and social presence extend what COI assesses, but this analysis benefits online instructors by helping them to identify and incorporate influence approaches more strategically into their pedagogy.

COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY THEORY

COI theory is used in numerous studies, assessing a range of online learning environments including degree programs (Lee et al., 2006; Watts, 2017), MOOCs (Kovanović et al., 2019), web-based simulations (Cooper et al., 2020), and courses (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Hilliard & Stewart, 2019; Stewart, 2017). Through its lenses of cognitive, social, and teaching presences, COI examines messages and activities contributing to student success in online learning.

Cognitive presence is achieved when students create meaning and reflect on their learning to confirm understandings of complex processes (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Instructors assist by scaffolding the "process of critical inquiry": setting up a complex problem, helping students to explore and integrate relevant information, and encouraging students to apply and test their new ideas (p. 134). Achieving cognitive presence suggests that students have progressed from lower- to higher-order thinking (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Ideally, students will acquire a set of behaviors and actions constituting cognitive presence, with the other presences supporting this.

Social presence is built on the premise that engaging with others fosters learning (Wang & Wang, 2012). A critique of online learning environments is that they lack the structures of support and community often taken for granted in face-to-face classes (Bejerano, 2008). Thus, a common misconception about online learning is that those who succeed do so primarily through self-motivation and not through connections with others (Wooten & Hancock, 2009). COI does not support the myth of the isolated learner. Instead, instructors and students cultivate social presence by sharing beliefs and values, cooperating to create trusting learning environments, and collaborating around common intellectual tasks (Swan et al., 2009). Group cohesion, or a sense of community among students, is a characteristic of social presence (Akyol & Garrison, 2008).

Teaching presence is accomplished through course design, discourse facilitation, direct instruction (Anderson et al., 2001), and timely feedback (Shea et al., 2010). A positive correlation exists between teaching presence and student motivation (Baker, 2010) and between teaching presence and

social presence (Shea et al., 2006). Students also contribute to teaching presence by self-regulating their learning (Zimmerman, 2008) and contributing to the community (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). While research suggests self-regulation comprises a fourth learning presence (Pool et al., 2017; Shea et al., 2012), this COI revision is not included in all iterations of the theory (Garrison & Akyol, 2015).

COMMUNICATING POWER IN FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE CLASSES

In face-to-face instructional settings, instructors and students communicate influence in myriad ways. Power is a form of verbal and nonverbal communication—not a force directed at students but rather a communication activity shared between communicator and audience (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). Thus, the effectiveness of instructor power is measured by students' willingness to be influenced. Examining how instructor power is communicated, negotiated, and accepted (or not) by students helps instructors manage the classroom and more productively motivate students, thereby guiding learning.

College students are more likely to be persuaded by expert and referent power than by coercive, reward, or legitimate power, yet all bases have the potential to impact students and their learning. Early research that investigated coercive power indicated that it was found to "retard" student learning, while reward power showed no effect on learning (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984, p. 135), and instructors using legitimate power, assuming that students should do as they are told because "the teacher said so," more frequently met with student resistance (Richmond & Roach, 1992). Subsequent research, however, illustrates that reward power—when communicated to encourage students ("when instructors recognize and praise student accomplishments . . . and they affirm students for mastering course material")—exhibited a "small, positive effect" on learner empowerment (Schrodt et al., 2008, pp. 195-196). Additionally, further research about legitimate power indicates that it is a subtle but omnipresent force, legitimized by the institution of school and the role of teacher. Thus, even when instructors attempt to negotiate authority and democratize processes in the classroom collaboratively with students, legitimate power remains a power base from which instructors draw (Brubaker, 2009).

While each base communicates power to varying degrees, research has focused on referent and expert bases, demonstrating their communicative power to motivate students and help them learn (Richmond, 1990). Generally, the more individualized communication students receive the more likely they perceive instructors as drawing from expert and referent bases (Turman & Schrodt, 2006). For example, research shows that when prosocial (encouraging, constructive) behaviors and messages are used by instructors, they communicate power more successfully than antisocial (punishing, undermining) ones (Golish & Olson, 2000; Goodboy & Myers, 2009; Kearney et al., 1985). Prosocial communication includes instructors using an "interactive teaching style" (p. 275), referring to students by name, allowing for small talk, using eye contact, and asking students their opinions (Rocca, 2007). Instructors cultivating a respectful relationship with students likely encourages motivation and learning (Finn, 2012; Kelly et al., 2015), which tends to have a perpetuating effect: "If instructors use prosocial strategies, their students are likely to respond in kind" (Baker et al., 2005, p. 42).

Communicating effectively from an expert power base can be challenging. Social identity markers such as race and gender may diminish how communications of expert power are received by students (Chesler & Young, 2009; Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004). However, studies show that communicating from a referent base and building constructive relationships with students helps them be more receptive to communications of expert power. In other words, students who report positive relationships with their instructors may be more receptive when those instructors draw from an expert power base to help students learn difficult course material. Micari and Pazos (2012) examined a college-level organic chemistry class and analyzed the impact that the student-instructor relationship had on performance in this highly challenging course. They found a correlation between a positive student-professor relationship and a student's higher course grade and greater confidence in his/her ability to do well in the course (p. 45). Related to this, Schrodt and his colleagues (2008) found that when instructors communicated influence from a referent base, students' perceptions of their learner empowerment were enhanced. Learner empowerment occurs when students not only "feel

motivated to perform tasks but possess a level of control over those tasks" (pp. 183–184). Thus, students' willingness to be influenced through a referent base—in that they identify with the instructor—impacts motivation and performance.

Research investigating how power is communicated in face-to-face classrooms shows the importance of instructors adeptly drawing from the power bases. However, online learning environments pose challenges to power communication. Whether these environments employ synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of both modalities (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015), these environments rely to some degree on technological mediation. This mediation creates transactional distance, which may cultivate misperceptions and miscommunication (Moore, 1993). For example, in the face-to-face classroom, an instructor can immediately clarify a concept after seeing students' sidelong glances or confused looks. In this instance, transactional distance is minimal; however, transactional distance in the online classroom is greater than this.

Transactional distance is a key differentiator between online and face-to-face learning environments. While transactional distance can be moderated in online courses through cultivating a media-rich environment (Knight et al., 2008) or minimizing text-based communication (Dockter, 2016), doing so consistently and effectively is still challenging. Those prosocial strategies effortlessly implemented by instructors in face-to-face classrooms (especially nonverbal communication such as gestures and eye contact) are possible in online courses only through technological mediation (Dixon et al., 2017). This mediation uncovers the influence of transactional distance on both online synchronous and asynchronous activities. To varying degrees, transactional distance reveals that instructors cannot simply rely on the same strategies to communicate power in online courses as they do in face-to-face courses.

METHODS

My background and experiences teaching online technical and professional communication (TPC) graduate courses for five years and directing an online master's program in TPC for twelve years led me to focus my study design on an online graduate population. My positionality impacted data analysis and interpretation in that many of the instructor and student experiences emerging in the data resonated with me. Challenges instructors described were ones I grapple with as a graduate educator and many of the student reactions to various online teaching and learning situations were similar to ones I often discuss with program students. To help provide a robust interpretation of the study data, I rely on an interpretivist epistemology. In doing so, I have attempted to foreground how language and social interactions—as examined through the lenses of COI and the five bases of power framework—impact the reality of these socially constructed online graduate seminars (OGSs). To illustrate how I carried out this investigation, I discuss the study context and participants, interviews and document collection, and data analysis and interpretation.

Instructional Context and Participants

My institution focuses on online master's degree instruction: Of the 22 graduates degrees offered, 21 are master's degrees, and 14 master's programs are offered online. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for the case study, two OGSs were selected using convenience sampling from each of the university's three colleges. These OGSs enrolled only graduate students and did not require face-to-face meetings. I emailed the OGS instructors asking them to participate, and four instructors agreed—two from the arts and communication college and two from the education and health sciences college. Of the 58 students enrolled in these OGSs, eight agreed to be interviewed and each of the instructors teaching the OGSs agreed to be interviewed (Table 1).

Table 1. Breakdown of Online Graduate Seminar (OGS) by College and Participants

Arts and Communication College	Education and Human Sciences College
OGS #1 2 student participants 1 instructor participant	OGS #3 2 student participants 1 instructor participant
OGS #2 3 student participants 1 instructor participant	OGS #4 1 student participant 1 instructor participant

One instructor-participant had taught online OGSs for 17 years, two instructors for seven years,

and one instructor for three years. Each OGS had been taught by the instructor at least once before. Student-participants were enrolled in online master's degree programs: the majority (7/8 students) had completed OGSs for at least two semesters prior to the semester under study. One student was in her second semester of graduate work. Information about whether students went directly from an undergraduate to a graduate degree was not collected. However, all students were nontraditional graduate students who identified as working professionals with careers. The instructor and student participant groups each contained at least one male; of the total instructor- and student-participant pools, 83% were female.

Conducting Interviews and Collecting Seminar Documents

I conducted individual 30-minute audio-taped interviews with instructors and students during weeks one and two (Interview 1) and again during the final two weeks of the semester (Interview 2). For these interviews, I developed a set of semi-structured questions and used a script to ensure that all questions were posed uniformly (Appendix). At times, I diverted from the script to further probe participant responses to gain more detailed understandings of their experiences (Bernard, 2000). All instructors participated in Interviews 1 and 2. All eight students participated in Interview 1, and six participated in Interview 2. The instructors did not know which students were participating in the study.

Course syllabi and selected assignment sheets, discussion prompts, and instructor feedback were collected. In advance of Interview 1, instructors submitted their course syllabi and an assignment sheet or assignment description for a major project from the OGS. Instructors were free to select a project that was weighted the most or one they felt asked a great deal from students. For Interview 2, instructors chose feedback they provided to one student about one assignment (the selected assignment did not have to be the major project discussed during Interview 1). Instructors also selected one discussion board prompt that they perceived characterized how they used the discussion board in their OGS.

For this case study, I did not collect student-participants' discussion board postings nor the specific feedback they received from the instructor. Given the small sample size of the student population involved in the study, collecting these data and reporting about them in the study (quoting the feedback they received or excerpting their discussion board posts and replies) may have compromised students' anonymity. Instead, the feedback and OGS documents were used during the instructor and student interviews. The feedback and documents enabled instructor-participants to speak more specifically about how they crafted and disseminated these and how they believed power was communicated through them. Students also commented in the interviews about how they perceived and used the feedback and OGS documents and what, if any, impact they believed these had on their course experience and performance. Thus, the interviews served as sources of information about how the two different groups perceived power circulating, and I reported excerpts from the OGS documents and feedback to clarify and help triangulate these perceptions.

Data Handling and Analysis

Interview data were audiotaped and professionally transcribed. I began by analyzing Interview 1, starting with the instructor interviews and continuing with the student interviews, using a similar strategy to examine Interview 2. I read the transcripts in their entirety to obtain a general sense of the data and then worked with each interview individually. To analyze the data, I identified patterns and clustered related patterns into themes, systematically reducing the data (Creswell, 2003). Specifically, I worked inductively and interpretively, attempting to uncover and make explicit patterns in participant responses and assigning meaning to the data, thereby making inferences and refining my understanding of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to analyzing the interviews, I also examined the selected instructor feedback and OGS documents to identify how their content and design related to these themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Instructors primarily drew from expert, referent, and legitimate power bases to cultivate teaching and social presence and to help students practice and acquire cognitive presence. Direct instruction, feedback, and course tools such as the syllabus and discussion board helped instructors communicate power in various ways. To communicate from an expert power base, instructors needed

to be aware of students' workplace contexts—how to help students connect academic knowledge to the workplace and what experiences and skills students brought from the workplace to the course. Students perceived those instructors as most expert when they also drew from a referent base and assisted students in mastering course concepts.

Communicating Expert Power

Instructors communicated from expert power bases by identifying their teaching experience ("Look, I've done this with 1,200 students") and by referring to their workplace experience: "As a former K–12 teacher, I always put myself in [students'] shoes." Moreover, OGSs containing workplace-applicable content elevated instructors' level of expertise: Not only were instructors knowledgeable about the academic discipline, but also they grasped how academia connected to the workplace, "I think they're hoping, and again, I'm a former K–12 teacher, that, 'I'm going to take this course, I'm going to be able to take this and use it with my kids tomorrow.' They're going to want something hands on, applicable, authentic." As another instructor commented, "I really want them to situate this as competencies within their own environments. Having them understand where this is being done in their workplaces or in their worlds or where could it be done to improve communication where they are."

As "working adults," students expected this connection: "I'll definitely be taking things I read about, things I learn, to go into work the next morning: 'Okay, . . . how does it apply to what I'm doing right now? Are those lessons going to help me better my process as a professional?'" As another student indicated, "I would say all our assignments were very important. . . . Now when I'm in the field and I get a report back, I can understand it, I have a clue." Related to this, students wanted instructors to recognize the value they brought to the classroom (often this value involved workplace experience): "I'm already doing the job that this requires and calls for, so valuing that and not belittling that is very nice."

Not surprisingly, students perceived that instructors communicated expert power through direct instruction: "The way she talks and is teaching us, questions that were asked. . . . She was very comfortable in talking about her subjects. I just got the impression that she really knew her stuff." Responses to student questions also communicated expert power: "He's definitely an expert. No question. . . . I would go to him with questions, and he would kind of really parse out, 'Well, this is what you're trying to do.' You can tell he really knew what he was doing." Another student stated, "I think she knows it really well. . . . If there were questions, she was able to always offer some kind of feedback or suggestion." One student commented on two methods of direct instruction instructors used to communicate expert power:

> *She struck me as an expert, where others did so by kind of redirecting and controlling the day-to-day conversations. Yeah, like [a former instructor] would hop into the discussion boards. We'd all be kind of flailing or writing something for the sake of writing something, which some weeks are just like that. And he would say, 'Think about it like this,' or 'Redirect your answers to this.' So he was more hands-on, I guess. Maybe that's the word I'm looking for. But [my current instructor] wasn't like that. She was more of a human JSTOR.*

Students not only recognized when instructors communicated expert power, but they also distinguished instructors' subtly different approaches for doing so:

> *I would say instead of authority, I would just call it being the subject matter expert. You could tell she knew what she was talking about. She tried to explain things, but she didn't communicate that in the, know it all, I'm in charge type of way. . . . I think it was more of a laid-back style, which I appreciated. I've had some instructors where it seems like maybe they just wanted to hear themselves be a subject-matter expert. Where in this case I felt like she really wanted to share that information and help others.*

To this student, the female instructor conveyed that she was expert ("she knew what she was talking about"), yet her expertise was coupled with "a laid-back style," characterized by a pedagogical motivation ("she really wanted to share that information and help others"). Conversely, other instructors possessed different motivations, not

trying to "help" but rather to simply be perceived as expert. Students recognized this, with another student commenting about her instructor, "the feedback he gives is authoritative. . . . I've had some professors that are like, 'I know what I'm doing, but I'm on your level.' And I feel like [our instructor] has always kind of floated above. Does that make sense?"

This notion of the instructor "floating above" suggests a different instructor-student relationship respective to expertise and power than that described by the previous student (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017). Notice the use of "authority" in each comment. The former student dismisses the term as one that does not define her instructor ("I would say instead of authority . . ."), while the latter student invokes it ("the feedback he gives is authoritative"). While research often distinguishes between the terms power and authority (Pace & Hemmings, 2007), other studies use them interchangeably (Luke, 1996). In these scenarios, however, authority seems to suggest a more overt, nonfacilitative power, missing in the first excerpt and present in the second.

Expert and Referent Power: Helping Students Achieve Cognitive Presence

Instructors were not only perceived as expert by students when they imparted disciplinary knowledge or helped students connect course material to the workplace, instructors also were perceived as expert when they tapped into referent power bases, identifying student challenges with course content and assisting them in overcoming these challenges.

Instructors acknowledged several behaviors indicative of students' struggle to learn difficult material. One instructor stated that students needed to be more attentive, largely because of the nature of the subject matter: "This is finicky work. You don't have to like it to do it. You just have to pay attention. And if you want to get better, then pay attention to the details." Another instructor discussed how her students struggled with concision and clarity: "They go into academic speak mode, and the more they try to talk like a scholar and get all wrapped up in projecting the right scholarly identity, the less they say."

Instructors aided students by tailoring how they communicated with them, how they set the tone for the course, and by using specific pedagogies. Humor was a common approach to help diminish students' apprehension and lighten the mood of the OGS: "I use a lot of humor, and particularly in this class because it has a lot of math and stats. Students generally haven't really strong skills or interest in that area, so a lot of what I do is try and manage their anxiety around the content." Another instructor deployed humor and an easygoing tone, especially on the discussion board or in other forums in which students analyzed or synthesized course concepts:

> *I, often, am intentionally more goofy and playful and applied because they mirror my tone back to me. The funnier I am, the sillier they're willing to be in their posts, and if I post a silly response, someone else will. When they're able to handle the big concepts and engage with them in a more natural way, they say more. They think about it more. They're not concerned about framing this beautiful, complex, scholarly thought.*

To help diminish student anxiety and facilitate learning, instructors worked to create a "trusting" learning environment, with students asserting confidence and control: "What I'm trying to do is make a safe, trusting environment so that they will give themself an opportunity to learn." This safe space was predicated on students' ability to ask questions: "Lots of questions guaranteeing that there are no stupid questions." Moreover, students needed to acknowledge the difficulty of OGS content, and this acknowledgement was predicated on trust: "I continually pointed out, 'This is a really difficult piece. It is normal to not understand it.' I often reminded people that expressing uncertainty or even frustration were good things." Persuading students to take ownership of course content also built confidence: "'How can you use it?' . . . Because then people think, 'Oh, this could be mine because it doesn't just belong to the course. There's a way to make this mine so I get more engaged with it.'"

Besides altering their own approaches and strategies for communicating with students, instructors enacted various pedagogies to aid them. Namely, all instructors discussed the importance of scaffolding course content:

> *I guess the way I do it is by the pace with which I instruct. . . . I go backwards, and I start at such a fundamental level, it builds*

confidence in what they're already scared of. I'm going, 'Can you add?' 'Yes.' 'Okay, good. We're going to try that.' 'Subtract? Well, you are well on your way.'

To capably communicate expertise, instructors not only rely on an expert base (foregrounding teaching and workplace experience, using direct instruction), instructors also rely on a referent base to individuate students and help them manage and overcome anxiety and a lack of confidence. COI theory strongly emphasizes the impact of teaching presence on cognitive presence (Dockter, 2016; Kozan, 2016). Research shows students perform better when they have affirming instructor relationships and that this motivates students to apply themselves (Micari & Pazos, 2012). Yet when instructors communicate from a referent power base, they also may be more sensitive to recognizing anxiety or other barriers to student success and more adept at ameliorating these using humor, cultivating a safe learning environment, or scaffolding content. Thus, communicating from a referent power base not only may motivate students to redouble their efforts to perform better but also may signal instructors who are more intent at identifying how students are challenged and perhaps more resolved to support them.

Communicating Power Through Feedback

Instructors relied on expert and referent power bases to communicate feedback. In doing so, instructors used strategies that individualized students and made instructors appear approachable. Instructors spoke about how they personalized feedback by "always mak[ing] sure that the student is named properly" and by adopting a conversational tone: "I write a lot and some of it is possibly more conversational than it should be. . . . I also hope that the more copious conversational feedback might give an idea that I care, I'm listening, and this is interesting stuff." Another instructor commented, "I intentionally shift my tone when I am interacting with individual students, as opposed to the official documentation of the course . . . I move and shift more colloquial, try to inject some of my personality and humor."

Instructors provided students with different types of feedback, including comments on essays as well as notations on tests: "N = 10 but you used the mean, which is 20." Instructors also included feedback "outside of the margins": One instructor provided audio feedback embedded in a slideshow highlighting concepts students struggled with on tests. Other instructors individually scheduled times to discuss projects:

And then throughout a project I make myself available for students who are interested in it. . . . and then the other face-to-face happens [through] back-channeling either through emails or if an email can't satisfy concerns, questions, needs that they have, then we jump on a phone call.

While students appreciated individualized feedback ("I want to get to know my professor and make sure that she knows that I'm a person"), the majority simply wanted it (and all communication) to be prompt. One student noted that "if you're not there in person, sometimes it's difficult to coordinate communication or get help when you need it right away." Another student recalled being challenged by ill-timed essay feedback:

I think that some of the composition goals weren't achieved because I didn't get my grade for my first paper back until after the second paper was due. So, I made some corrections on the second paper, just kind of on my own, but then I haven't seen if I did it right yet.

Expert and referent power behaviors such as individuating students and providing timely feedback about student work powerfully cultivate teaching, social, and cognitive presence in OGSs. Referent behaviors promulgate social presence and affect student motivation and performance. Features of social presence, such as instructors individuating students and fostering affective expression motivate students to learn, fostering success. While effective social presence tends to promote a COI richer in cognitive presence (Shea et al., 2006), responding thoughtfully to student work is a major driver in communicating both teaching and cognitive presence (Shea et al., 2010). Effective feedback (i.e., constructive, explicit, timely, applicable) is perceived by students as a "crucial aspect" of teaching presence (Getzlaf et al., 2009, p. 8) and students who receive such feedback tend to perform better (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008).

Communicating Power Through Course Tools: Syllabi and Discussion Boards

Instructor power also is communicated through

course components—pedagogical tools set up by instructors for student use. For example, research shows the complexity with which the ubiquitous course syllabus communicates instructor power (Baecker, 1998; Singham, 2005; Thompson, 2007). In my study, syllabi included similar features: instructor contact information; course description and outcomes, assignment descriptions; late work policies; expectations for communicating with peers and instructors; technology requirements; and institutional policies regarding accommodations, grading, and academic integrity. Page length ranged from seven to 13 pages of information and policies, with an additional one to four pages of schedule (one instructor did not include a schedule). Instructors had fairly comparable ideas about the purpose of the syllabus: "It's sort of like the contract of, this is what we're going to do together. This is what we're hoping we're going to achieve by the end of the semester." Additionally, instructors defined course topics and philosophies: "How I feel about graduate school in general, How I feel about their roles."

Instructors relied on the syllabus' legitimate power to communicate influence. Indeed, students perceived it as an extension of the rightful power assigned to instructors by virtue of their positions as teachers. However, this genre also communicates power through referent and expert bases. One instructor mentioned editing her syllabus to mitigate a problematic statement and achieve a more appropriate tone:

> *I had a line that had been in my syllabus for years that I took out last year, because I realized it was preventing people from asking for help because it sounded too mean. It was just a statement: 'I do not accept late work.' I realize, having that blunt statement in there, sometimes people have a reason that is excusable for late work, and they were not asking because of that statement. I realized, I'm not mean, and I don't think projecting that at the beginning helps.*

Another instructor recognized the development of her tone over time: "Well, now it [the syllabus tone] is much lighter. Yeah. But I work really hard at that because initially I come off really officious and that's not my intent. I don't want to scare students." The tone of the syllabus communicates how the instructor wishes to position herself to students, and in these cases, instructors saw opportunities to manipulate that tone, leveraging a more referent power base. Another instructor relied on an expert power base: When asked about the syllabus' tone, the instructor commented, "I would say probably professional. I work hard to come off as educated and knowledgeable. I write it specifically to illustrate the level of expectation that I have for students, which is high."

Instructors were correct in assuming students recognized instructor tone conveyed through syllabi. Some students identified (and appreciated) when a syllabus was "neutral" and "very informational": "I felt like the overall syllabus is very inviting and very clean. It felt like somebody really took the time to go through it. I feel like it's going to be an easy reference for me." Others identified instructor personality and expectations:

> *I felt like it was conversational. I felt like reading the syllabus, I was able to get a sense of the professor's personality and a sense of his professionalism. And so, it felt like I came away feeling like I had if I had been taking this class and personally, I had met him on the first day, I got a sense that he took the class seriously. He had these expectations for us, and I got his personality through that.*

The syllabus conveys teaching presence by characterizing the design and organization of the course and social presence by describing expectations for students and instructors ("your regular engagement, consistent presence, and active participation are paramount to your success in the course"). While students appreciated its policies-oriented nature, the majority found the syllabus most useful as a "roadmap." In this sense, syllabi also promulgated cognitive presence. Throughout the semester, students used the syllabus to remind themselves how quizzes, assignments, and projects related to one another and helped them achieve course objectives: "It [the syllabus] should in general be really helpful once our projects start, to refer back to the impetus for assigning that project rather than just the project-specific outline on it. So how does it fit in as a whole with the rest of the class?" Another student commented:

Getting that idea of what the big picture of those projects is, because that's really applied more in the syllabus, it's kind of looking at that aerial view of where we're going. I've already used it as a very clear roadmap for where I am so far, and where I need to be going.

While syllabi are contracts between instructors and students and serve as a course's permanent record, they also are learning tools (Parkes & Harris, 2002). Students who are familiar with the syllabus genre, like graduate students, use the document "as a blueprint or guide for the class" (Lutz & Fuller, 2007, p. 214). In this study, students appreciated syllabi that provided them with this "roadmap" for the OGS and frequently commented on the ways this document set the tone for the course and helped reveal the instructor's personality.

Another course tool, the discussion board, communicates legitimate, expert, and referent instructor power, cultivating teaching, social, and cognitive presence. The board provides opportunities for direct instruction and instructor feedback, interaction among students and instructors, and student reflection and synthesis of course content. However, the board is an asynchronous teaching tool in that posts and responses often are hours or even days apart. This complicates its use and the ways power is communicated: Engendering conversations with the same rapidity and dynamism as face-to-face discussions is not possible. Yet its asynchronous quality arguably allows students to carefully craft responses, potentially encouraging them to reflect more substantively about course content.

This instructor perceived the discussion board as a conduit for direct instruction and as a means to connect with students:

I read every post. If there's something that needs a response, if there's clarification [needed] or I need further clarification, I will respond to that immediately. My goal is . . . That everybody gets an individual response at least two, three times a semester.

The instructor's consistent presence on the board confirms it as a source of legitimate power, and she taps into an expert power base by inserting direct instruction ("clarification") into the discussion. The instructor's effort to respond to students ("My goal is . . . That everybody gets an individual response") suggests that she also draws from a referent power base.

Instructor visibility on the board was a point of deliberation for instructors. Instructors often monitored the board, only participating in discussions when students needed clarification: "The only time I tend to chime in is if they get off task, and then I might just bring it back around or redirect or add something if there is an inaccuracy." Instructors perceived that when they were visibly present, discussion abated: "I can clarify, but they go into this mode where they want teacher's correct answer. And sometimes that nips discussion really hard."

Instructor visibility on the board is important for fostering presence, so instructors found other ways to leverage the board to communicate through expert, referent, and legitimate power bases. Namely, instructors acknowledged student discussions off of the board: "Last semester, I stayed way back on the forums because they were so good at talking to each other, but I mentioned their posts often in videos and in the weekly instruction sets." Another instructor posted an audio lecture, which students accessed after they posted to the board: "Here's the major thing that I think you should have gotten out of this. Not to say they didn't—just to make sure . . . And they love it. They love it because they want me to tell them what I think." For others, feedback was communicated to students off the board, "when somebody makes a misstep of some sort . . . I take my comments and my re-guiding individually to them offline . . . I'm trying to build some trust and motivate students [and] build a relationship between the two of us."

These examples illustrate how the discussion board served as a jumping-off point for direct instruction and feedback (teaching presence) as well as affirming behaviors— "I mentioned their posts often"— (social presence). Because students are asked to engage directly in course content, cognitive presence can be cultivated as well.

Helping students achieve cognitive presence meant instructors needed to guide student discussion, and this guidance began with crafting discussion board prompts that elicit students' deliberate thinking and substantive response:

I also write a very structured, very guided

prompt that people can work through point-by-point or apply in a very specific way. So there's never just, 'Respond.' There's always, 'Think about the ways that's different from their own experience in this context.' We try to put things in context and keep adjusting applications, so people don't ever just kind of stare at it and not know where to start. I'm open to flexibility, but I offer some very firm lights on the discussions.

Prompts were meant to guide student response, thereby managing student reflection and application of course content. Because of the board's asynchronous nature, instructors could not facilitate discussions as they would in a face-to-face environment. Detailed discussion board prompts, such as the following, attempted to substitute for this:

What model(s) of . . . research best support(s) the conception of ongoing, audience-involved research? Why and how? How do these authors relate to one another and others you've engaged in the course and throughout the program? When responding, keep in mind the quote from Johnson . . . Use specific examples (both textual and real world) to support your claims.

This prompt was characteristic of others I collected: It refers to the assigned content ("How do *these authors* . . ."), poses multiple questions that ask students to identify ("*What models* . . .") and synthesize ("How do *these authors relate* . . ."), and requires students to apply knowledge beyond the course ("Use specific examples [both textual and *real world*] . . .").

Instructors in this study devised various strategies for encouraging students to engage in the discussion board and worked to manage their visibility and board interactions. Research shows that structured prompts improve students' posting precision and perceptions of the discussion activity (Chen et al., 2017; Darabi et al., 2013). Studies also show that instructors' posting frequency does not impact student perceptions of instructor or course quality, but that "instructional posts"—much like the audio lectures, videos, and individual off-line feedback that instructors in my study produced—help students learn and achieve (Hoey, 2017, p. 276).

CONCLUSIONS

In this case study, I used COI theory and McCroskey and Richmond's (1983) five bases of power framework to examine how power was communicated in four OGSs by responding to these research questions:

- How do instructors communicate power in OGSs?
- How do students perceive and respond to these communications of power?
- To what extent are features of power associated with COI cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence?

The study indicated that instructors communicate power through direct instruction, feedback, and course tools such as the syllabus and discussion board. Rather than relying on reward and coercive power bases, instructors primarily drew from expert, referent, and legitimate bases to cultivate teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Specifically, instructors communicated from an expert power base mainly by referring to their teaching and workplace experience and communicating subject-matter content to students through feedback and direct instruction. Course documents such as the syllabus and common course tools like the discussion board helped to communicate instructors' legitimate power. This study showed that drawing from a referent power base and using strategies such as individualizing students, cultivating a trusting and safe learning environment, and communicating with students to assuage anxiety and buoy confidence not only may aid student learning (cognitive presence) but also reinforce student perceptions of instructor expertise.

Student reactions to instructor communications of power spoke to the complexity of the OGS as a learning environment. While students responded in relatively predictable ways to legitimate power (the "assigned power" that instructors wield simply by occupying the instructor role) by expecting, for example, the course syllabus to include certain content or make specific demands, students' responses to communications of expert and referent power suggest that these two bases work powerfully in tandem (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983, p. 177). That is, instructors were perceived as expert when they imparted disciplinary knowledge

or helped students connect course content to workplace practice but even more so when instructors identified students' challenges with the course content and assisted them in overcoming these. Thus, those instructors who communicated from expert *and* referent power bases communicated power most convincingly.

Features of power were intimately associated with all three COI presences. Drawing from an expert power base helped instructors adeptly deliver direct instruction (teaching presence) and to assign coursework that students could use to test and apply course concepts (cognitive presence). Communicating from a referent base by creating a trusting and safe learning environment, individuating students, and scaffolding course content to respond to student abilities helps students learn (cognitive presence), promotes student interaction with one another and the instructor (social presence), and may prompt students to be more receptive to tackling course assignments and responding to instructor feedback (teaching presence). Course tools like the discussion board helped to exhibit the interaction among legitimate, expert, and referent power and the ways these affect teaching, social, and cognitive presence. The discussion board communicates expert power by providing opportunities for direct instruction and instructor feedback (teaching presence); draws on referent power by encouraging interaction among students and instructors (social presence); and uses expert, legitimate, and referent power to prompt student reflection and synthesis of content (cognitive presence).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Identifying how power circulates in four OGSs and how this use of power relates to the cognitive, social, and teaching presences found in these communities of inquiry enables me to make three recommendations about how instructors may use these results to help students learn.

First, instructors can employ seemingly commonplace course tools such as the syllabus and discussion board to more astutely cultivate presences and effectively communicate power. While syllabi routinely communicate legitimate power by defining the seminar's purposes and policies, by communicating through an expert power base and describing how assignments build on one another and relate to outcomes, instructors encourage cognitive presence. Students look to the syllabus for this purpose: The syllabus is not simply a policies clearinghouse but a "road map" for reflecting on the OGS's "big picture."

Discussion board analysis also illustrates how instructors may more precisely nurture presences and communicate power in ways students find receptive. For example, an instructor's consistent presence on the board (as evidenced by regular replies or posts) confirms it as a source of legitimate power. In this way, an instructor's presence is analogous to standing at the front of a physical classroom—simply being in this position helps legitimize instructor power. However, much like the ways the physical classroom's climate changes when the instructor takes this position, instructor presence also influences how students interact and respond on the board. Instructors recognize this and may instead inconspicuously monitor students' posts and replies without inserting their own; however, this strategy often diminishes instructor presence.

Identifying how legitimate power is communicated and related to teaching presence shows that instructors are in a bind: Too much teaching presence limits student interaction, which may hinder opportunities to cultivate cognitive presence, while too little teaching presence erodes instructor legitimacy. To solve this, instructors discreetly monitored the board and used other strategies besides post-and-reply to substantiate their teaching presence. In this study, instructors made sure to "mention their posts often in videos and in the weekly instruction sets" or "take [instructor] comments . . . to them offline": Doing so documented instructors' presence and created opportunities to facilitate students' cognitive presence by emphasizing key course concepts. This understanding of how power and the presences work respective to the discussion board demonstrates how instructors may use the board in more deliberate and robust ways.

Second, communicating instructor expertise often is considered analogous to deftly disseminating disciplinary knowledge (Carr et al., 2013), yet communicating expertise goes beyond this: Expertise is not just about what instructors know but it is also about understanding what students do not know. In my study, instructors drew from expert and referent bases to recognize when

students experienced difficulty mastering course concepts. To help students overcome anxiety and build confidence, instructors altered their tone, nurtured trust, and deployed pedagogies like scaffolding course content. Communicating expert and referent power by recognizing when and how students struggled and by engaging in affirming behaviors, which helped create a trusting course environment, were meant to incentivize students to learn and improve (Myers & Bryant, 2004). In my study, students perceived instructors being motivated in different ways when communicating expert power to them. Students perceived that some instructors communicated expertise simply to showcase their own abilities while others did so with a pedagogical motivation. This motivation was appreciated by students and signaled that instructors "really wanted to share that information and help others." In this instance, communicating instructor expertise entailed communicating not only from an expert base but from a referent one as well.

Third, an effective strategy for communicating expert power is one that instructors also can use to help students learn in deep and meaningful ways. Students who achieve cognitive presence are given opportunities to grapple with complex problems, research and test possible solutions, and apply their new knowledge to other spheres beyond the course. Applying course content to one's personal or professional life is a hallmark of achieving cognitive presence (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). In my study, students welcomed opportunities to make connections between their courses and workplaces. Instructors who taught students about these connections and how they work not only were perceived as expert by students, but also they prompted students to practice cognitive presence. Students who work across academia-workplace boundaries in these ways also helped confirm and bolster instructors' knowledge of the workplace, as students reported to them about their successes and challenges.

Analyzing teaching, social, and cognitive presences and the ways instructor power is communicated through them allows instructors to motivate students and encourage learning in online learning environments. Applying the lenses of teaching, cognitive, and social presence to the problem of communicating power online also showcases another facet of the COI model. Until now, studies have not examined power and the presences, but this particular application serves as a first step in that examination.

APPENDIX

PRE-COURSE FACULTY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions adapted from Jean Lutz and Mary Fuller, "Exploring Authority: A Case Study of a Composition and a Professional Writing Classroom," *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *16*.2 (201-232).

I plan to ask instructor-participants to bring in the syllabus for the course under study as well as an assignment sheet or assignment description for a major project that will be assigned in the course (instructors may choose a project that is weighted the most or the one they feel asks the most from students). I plan to ask the instructor-participants questions about these documents.

1. Background Information
    a. How many years have you been teaching graduate courses?
    b. How long have you been teaching online graduate courses?
    c. How many times have you taught this online graduate seminar (OGS)?
    d. Prior to this class, how many face-to-face interactions have you had with the students in your OGS? *(Face-to-face could mean meeting physically or virtually, either in your on-campus office or using Skype or Zoom.)*
    e. Approximately how many synchronous learning activities do you anticipate scheduling with students in your OGS this semester? *(By "synchronous learning activities" I mean those activities in which students meet with you individually or in a group in real time, either face-to-face or using Skype or Zoom.)*
2. What are your general expectations about how teachers should treat students?
3. Does how you are treated matter? (If yes, in what way? If no, why not?)
4. In general, how do you communicate respect to students in your OGSs?
5. What strategies do you use to influence students in your OGSs?
6. Do you think it's important for instructors to empower students? (If so, for what purposes? If no, why not?)
7. What goals do you have for students in your OGS?
8. What is your impression about your students' expectations for this class?
9. How will you approach responding to student work in this OGS? What is your role?
10. What is the student's role in this feedback exchange?
11. As an instructor, do you actively try to cultivate a sense of community among students in your OGS? (If yes, why is this important, and how do you do it? If no, why not?)

[Questions 12-15 concern the instructor's OGS syllabus]

12. What is the purpose for the syllabus? What are you trying to achieve?
13. How do students typically respond to your syllabus?
14. What type of tone/voice are you trying to communicate through your syllabus?
15. Do you try to communicate this tone throughout your course? (If yes, in what ways?)

[Questions 16-18 concern the instructor's major project assignment]

16. What goals do you have for students when they complete this major project?

17. What types of tasks do students need to perform to successfully complete the project?

18. When students complete the project successfully, how do you think it makes them feel?

19. Do you have any other comments to add?

POST-COURSE FACULTY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions adapted from Jean Lutz and Mary Fuller, "Exploring Authority: A Case Study of a Composition and a Professional Writing Classroom," *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *16*.2 (201-232).

I plan to ask instructor-participants to bring in feedback provided to one student about one assignment (feedback that the instructor feels would be particularly useful to the student). I also plan to ask instructors to bring in one discussion board prompt that characterizes how they use the discussion board. I plan to ask the instructor-participants questions about these documents.

1. What goals, if any, did you have for this OGS?

2. Did you achieve those goals? Why or why not?

3. In this OGS, how did you influence students? Can you give me an example?

4. Students completed a major project for your class. Overall, how do you feel they performed?

5. If you could give students advice about how to improve their performance on this project, what would you say to them?

6. If you teach this OGS again, do you plan to assign this project again? Why or why not?

[Questions 7-10 concern the instructor's discussion board prompt]

7. In many OGSs the discussion board is an important learning tool. How did you use the discussion board in this OGS?

8. In general, how did students react to using the discussion board?

9. What was your role on the discussion board? In other words, were your present on the board, and if so, how?

10. Tell me about what you were asking students to do in this discussion board prompt. What was the purpose?

[Questions 11-14 concern the instructor's feedback]

11. Tell me a little bit about the context for this feedback you provided. What assignment was this for?

12. What did you hope to achieve by providing this feedback?

13. In what ways is this feedback characteristic of the feedback you tend to provide to students on assignments like this?

14. In general, how do you think your feedback makes students feel?

15. Do you have any other comments to add?

PRE-COURSE STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions adapted from Jean Lutz and Mary Fuller, "Exploring Authority: A Case Study of a Composition and a Professional Writing Classroom," *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *16*.2(201-232).

During the interview, I plan to ask student-participants specific questions about their OGS's course syllabus.

20. Background Information

    a. How many semesters have you been taking graduate courses?

    b. How many semesters have you been taking online graduate courses?

    c. Prior to this class, how many face-to-face interactions have you had with the instructor or with students in this OGS? *(Face-to-face could mean meeting physically or virtually, either on-campus or off-campus or using Skype or Zoom.)*

21. What are your general expectations about how teachers should treat students?

22. Does how you are treated matter? In what way?

23. In general, how can an online instructor show respect for you?

24. How can an online instructor show disrespect?

25. Do you think it's important for instructors to empower students, and if so, for what purposes?

26. What kind of things can an online instructor do to make you feel powerless?

27. What kind of things can an online instructor do to make you feel powerful?

28. What goals, if any, do you have for this course?

29. Are these goals any different from previous graduate courses you have had? (If yes, in what ways?)

30. What is your impression about your instructor's expectations for this class?

31. What expectations do you have about how your instructor will act towards you?

32. What expectations do you have about how the instructor will respond to your writing and other assignments?

[Refer student to the OGS course syllabus]

33. In your opinion, what is the purpose for this course syllabus?

34. In what ways have you used this syllabus? How do you plan to use it throughout the semester?

35. What is your impression of the tone/voice of the syllabus?

36. Do you have any other comments to add?

POST-COURSE STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions adapted from Jean Lutz and Mary Fuller, "Exploring Authority: A Case Study of a Composition and a Professional Writing Classroom," *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *16*.2(201-232).

16. What goals, if any, did you have for this course?

17. Did you achieve those goals? Why or why not?

18. What is your impression of your instructor's goals for this class?

19. How did your instructor communicate these goals?

20. You completed a major project for your class. Was completing the project challenging for you? Why or why not?

21. If you had to complete the project over again, what would you do differently?

22. What could the instructor have done to improve the project?

23. What did you learn from the project?

24. Do you feel empowered having completed the project? (If yes, how? If no, why?)

25. Did you experience a sense of community with your classmates in this OGS?

    a. *If yes*, how did this sense of community make you feel? What activities, assignments, or events helped cultivate this sense of community?

    b. *If no*, how did this lack of community make you feel?

26. How did your instructor interact with you?

27. To what extent does your instructor know his/her subject? How was this communicated to you?

28. How did the instructor respond to your writing and other assignments?

29. What was the instructor's approach to using the discussion board? Was the instructor present on the discussion board? How?

30. Does your instructor communicate authority in the class? In what ways?

31. How did the instructor's strategy for communicating authority compare with other online instructors you have had?

32. Do you have any other comments to add?

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