

## *Chapter Two*

# **| The Balance of Power**

How would you characterize today's college students? Empowered, confident, self-motivated learners? That is not how I would describe mine. The ones in my classes are hopeful but generally anxious and tentative. They want all classes to be easy but expect that most will be hard. They wish their major (whatever it might be) did not require math, science, or English courses. A good number will not speak in class unless called on. Most like, want, indeed need, teachers who tell them exactly what to do. Education is something done unto them. It frequently involves stress, anxiety, and other forms of discomfort.

When my colleagues and I discuss our students, we always end up asking the same question: How can we overcome these kind of attitudes that often compromise students' ability to learn? But we should be asking a more fundamental question: What makes learners like this? Why are so many students anxious, indecisive, and unsure of themselves as learners? And even more pointed, is there something about the way we teach that discourages students' development as learners?

According to theories of radical and feminist pedagogy, and theories and research related to self-regulated learners, students' motivation, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning are all adversely affected when teachers control the processes through and by which they learn. Do we control those processes? Yes, but teacher authority is so taken for granted that most of us are no longer aware of the extent to which we direct student learning.

See if honest answers to the following set of questions provide insight. Who decides what (content) students learn in the course?

Who controls the pace (calendar) at which content is covered? Who determines the structures (assignments, tests) through which the material will be mastered? Who sets the conditions for learning (things like attendance policies and assignment deadlines)? Who evaluates (grades) the quantity and quality of the learning that has occurred? In the classroom itself, who controls and regulates the flow of communication, deciding who gets the opportunity to speak, when, and for how long? Overall, who makes all (or even most) of the important decisions about learning for students?

If that set of questions fails to convince, consider more tangible evidence of our propensity to control. Look at the number and tone of the directives contained in most syllabi. Even comparatively mild-mannered, normally gentle faculty resort to edicts, demands, and otherwise definitive directives as they set down the law for students: "No late papers accepted, ever, under any circumstances." "Failure to meet participation expectations will result in lower grades." "Do not talk in class. Keep quiet. You are here to listen and to learn." "You must do the reading before you come to class. Your uninformed opinion does not add to the discussion." We do need to clarify expectations for students. They frequently arrive in college and class with any number of inaccurate ones, but must those messages always be communicated with heavy-handed language? Language like this has a subtext that relates to power and control.

Baecker (1998, p. 60) writes of the syllabus, "All of these issues of power and authority come together in this document, the creation of which, it is important to note, is a right reserved for the instructor. Our students certainly don't come to us on the first day with a written list of their demands and expectations." She continues to explore, using an analysis of fifteen syllabi, how we establish control, often using language that appears inclusive and collaborative but really is not. She concludes, "If the syllabi I examined in this study are any indication, we do a very poor job of negotiating power in the classroom" (p. 61).

Still more concrete evidence can be summoned from other instructional arenas. Consider any number of faculty policies directed at student behaviors, and then inquire honestly as to the connection between those behaviors and learning. There are faculty who will not teach if students wear baseball caps in the class-

room. Others specify all the logistical parameters of papers: font size and style, paper weight, margin width, and whether it should be stapled or clipped. Still others prohibit gum chewing in class. I know a faculty member who expects students to clean his overhead transparencies. Faculty are good at justifying these kinds of policies and practices; we always have our reasons, and maybe some are legitimate, but sometimes the links between the policies and power issues are more obvious than their connections to learning.

You may be ready to accept that we do exercise considerable power over student learning but believe we do so for good reasons. Consider three of those reasons, and then assess their validity. The reason that faculty name first involves the students themselves: they cannot be trusted to make decisions about learning because they lack intellectual maturity, do not have good study skills, are not well prepared, do not like the content area, take courses to get grades, and do not care about learning.

These characteristics do describe many college students and must be addressed if students are to make more decisions about their own learning. Much of the content in this chapter and subsequent ones deals with developing student capabilities as learners and with preparing them to take more responsibility for learning. But the fact that students need to be prepared to handle learner-centered approaches is not an endemic reason that justifies our making all the decisions about their learning for them. Mallinger (1998, p. 473) points out, "The argument for instructor-directed leadership assumes that students are not *capable* [emphasis added] of expanding their maturity level." He believes, as I do, that faculty can reduce the amount they control at the same time they use structures that promote student growth and provide quality education.

Second, faculty make the decisions about student learning because we always have. It is an assumed, unquestioned part of what it means to be the teacher. Braye (1995, p. 1), writing about teacher control, describes the traditional view: "A 'good' teacher dominates the classroom and its elements. She prepares lesson plans for efficient use of class time, prescribes course objectives, and disseminates information clearly and effectively so that students may learn it quickly, remember it well, and reproduce it upon demand." We assume that making all these decisions and

being indisputably in charge benefits students, but we have never really thought about it or carefully analyzed how learning might be affected by our actions.

Should you decide to embark on this kind of analysis, be prepared for some surprises. For years in my own teaching, I made decisions motivated by what I thought was the best interests of my students. I never recognized that those decisions sometimes benefited me more than my students. I began to see that as I made my way through Brookfield's *Becoming a Critical Reflective Teacher* (1995), which encourages critical reflection, the in-depth analysis that begins with the details of instructional practice and uses them to uncover the assumptions and premises on which they rest. Brookfield says that reflection is critical when it aims to accomplish two purposes: "The first is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interests" (p. 8). The process of critical reflection creates a rationale for classroom policies and practices, grounding them on something other than tacit, uncritical acceptance of what has always been.

Finally, we are motivated to control because teaching makes us vulnerable. Teachers almost never mention this reason, probably because their understanding of it is more intuitive than explicit. An anecdote shared by a colleague illustrates the complex interplay of variables related to control and vulnerability. My colleague is an experienced, poised, confident, and highly effective teacher who has a recurring bad dream about teaching. It is the first day of his large entry-level business class. He is going through his usual introduction, pointing out that he is a full professor and no longer required to teach beginning classes, but he chooses to do so. Somewhere in the middle of these promotional messages, a student whose face he can never quite make out stands up, interrupts, and loudly declares that the instructor is bogus, a great big fake, and he ought to be removed. Students have paid for and deserve better. As this student interlocutor energizes the class, they surge toward the front of the room. My colleague awakes kicking and screaming as he is bodily removed from class.

The dream is funny, but something about it makes us nervous. It might trigger a flashback to that day we added an extra assignment or moved up the test date. We were not bodily removed from class, but we nevertheless felt vulnerable even there behind the podium and fully in charge. On that day, we stood our ground, and students went along with the decision. However, for a fleeting moment, there was a question, and we realized that students can refuse to accept our authority and can challenge our position in the classroom.

Despite all that we can control, students do make some important decisions on their own. One example makes the point: students themselves decide whether to learn at all. If they decide not to, that puts faculty in a bind. Although learning can and does regularly occur in the absence of teacher-based instruction, if teaching regularly occurs and no learning results, that becomes a serious indictment of the teaching—one that ultimately challenges its purpose and existence.

Most faculty do not feel vulnerable in the classroom because students are not learning. We tend to think that is their fault anyway. The threats we respond to in the classroom are much more immediate and visceral. We think someone is challenging our authority. Then we really make it clear who is in charge. Ironically, overreacting nets the opposite result. The iron-clad syllabus with its completely specified policies effectively handcuffs students to the course and sets up an adversarial relationship that all but dares students to challenge the authority. Kearney and Plax's research (1992) documents that student resistance to faculty efforts to control is common and widespread. They estimate that about 21 percent of students engage in some form of resistance. Their work makes clear that although most students resist passively, some do confront the teacher openly and aggressively.

Our understanding and response to the power dynamics of the classroom bespeak our naiveté and failure to understand the complicated continuum of control that exists between teacher and learner. We feel the need to be in control and assert our position and authority over students, but we fail to understand that the need results from our own vulnerabilities and desire to manage an ambiguous and unpredictable situation successfully. The idea of

giving up control, of involving students in decisions faculty have traditionally made, frightens many teachers. Won't students take advantage of diminished teacher control? They could orchestrate some sort of coup and overthrow the teacher! How can we possibly give up control when our hold is already so tenuous?

We are about to address those questions, but I move to them having asserted that faculty exercise broad and deep control over the learning processes that affect students. I have argued that we exercise that kind of power for a variety of not very carefully thought out or convincing reasons. But our vested self-interests may make it difficult for us to understand and accept, at least initially, the negative role power has played in learning. May I encourage your continued contemplation of the role of power in your classes as we now explore how the decision-making dynamic changes when teaching is learner-centered.

### How the Balance of Power Changes

Radical and feminist pedagogues and those who study self-directed learners posit that to be truly learner-centered, we must begin with greater insight into the role of power in our classrooms: who exerts it, why, and with what effects and what benefits. With a more explicit understanding of the power dynamic, we are ready to explore how the balance of power changes in a learner-centered environment. And then we can ascertain whether involvement in the decision making associated with learning has a positive impact on students' educational experiences. Do the benefits justify their involvement?

### Power Is Shared

When teaching is learner-centered, power is shared rather than transferred wholesale. Faculty still make key decisions about learning, but they no longer make all decisions and not always without student input. But even so, this change immediately raises ethical issues for faculty. It gets to the heart of what it means to be a teacher and what teachers are supposed to do.

Many who object to the ideas of radical pedagogy do so on the ground that if faculty relinquish control, they abrogate legitimate

instructional responsibility. Students, they say, end up running the class and teaching themselves, leaving the teacher no viable role in the educational process. It is true that this educational philosophy ultimately dispenses with the teacher. The goal is to equip students with learning skills so sophisticated that they can teach themselves. However, both conceptually and pragmatically, this is a gradual process, not an all-or-none proposition. Power is redistributed in amounts proportional to students' ability to handle it. As explored at length in Chapter Five, with more freedom to make learning choices comes more responsibility to accept the consequences of those choices. Although I suspect that some of the radical pedagogues would object to an implementation process as gradual as that proposed in this book, to transfer decision making too quickly does seem to me an ethical violation of legitimate instructional responsibility.

An example will help differentiate between an unethical transfer of power and an appropriate sharing of the decision-making process. A teacher violates his legitimate power and authority if he allows entry-level students in his required survey of sociology course to select the textbook. These students do not have experience in or knowledge of the discipline to make a good textbook decision. Alternatively, imagine if the teacher surveyed a variety of textbooks in the light of his goals and objectives for the course and his understanding of students' learning needs and then selected five books that would accomplish his aims and meet student needs. He could then create a student textbook review committee and as a group project let them make and justify a textbook recommendation. I have a colleague who routinely uses this method for textbook selection. He reports two surprising results: students almost never select the textbook he predicts they will, and he never gets low scores on the student rating question that inquires as to the quality and appropriateness of the textbook.

In addition to the ethical ramifications of power sharing, faculty also fear giving up too much control, especially in the light of their students' abilities to handle more responsibility. But there are ways of limiting decision making as students learn to make good decisions and assume responsibility for them. For example, giving students the chance to offer input or make recommendations is not the same as letting them make those decisions. Letting students

make decisions in one or two areas is not the same as giving them discretion over the whole range of decisions about learning. Student decisions can be constrained by limiting the scope of their decisions. In my course, I let students decide which assignments they will complete in the course (one is required), but I set the parameters of those assignments. Although students select a particular assignment, they do not decide what that assignment entails or when it is due.

Although I am advocating for a gradual transfer of power and control, make no mistake that the power sharing described in this chapter constitutes a major change. It is premised on theories of teaching and learning radically different from those that ground current instructional practice. These theories propose that faculty, willingly and responsibly, begin to give up some of their control in the interest of creating motivated, confident, responsible learners.

### The Benefits of Power Sharing

Power sharing benefits students and learning. It also benefits teachers and the learning environment in a class and at an institution. Consider the advantages in each of these areas in more detail.

The biggest and most important beneficiary of the power transfer is students and, subsequently, their learning. The impact on students and their learning is so interconnected that it is not possible to discuss them separately. But students benefit first, although initially efforts to share power meet resistance. When I introduce learner-centered approaches, my students are confused. They do not understand it, and once they do, they try to give the power back. They do not (in my experience and the experience of others) take the power given, grab more, and run off with the course. They actually prefer teacher-centered classrooms, but not for reasons that benefit their learning.

When it becomes clear that I will not make the decisions I have given them, they begin to exercise their power tentatively and anxiously. They want feedback and need reinforcement. Then they move forward with a bit more confidence. It is difficult to say precisely when it happens, but one day, quite unexpectedly, the students are engaged and involved with the course and its content. There is

an energy about the class, a kind of enthusiasm. Instructional nirvana does not descend. Not everybody is involved and engaged, and some activities and assignments still bomb. But student response to my efforts to share power has been the most eloquent evidence to me that learner-centered teaching is a powerful pedagogy.

If students are engaged, involved, and connected with a course, they are motivated to work harder in that course, and we know from so many studies that time on task results in more learning. In addition to how much students learn, how well they learn it is important. In my case, they become able to apply the content to their own communication. They learn not just about how communication works from a theoretical and conceptual basis; they come to understand themselves as communicators and suddenly see communication happening all around them. Knowledge is power, and it brings my students confidence. They now exercise their power with purpose and sometimes with poise.

Power sharing also benefits teachers. You no longer struggle with passive, uninterested, disconnected students. Their energy motivates and drives you to prepare more, risk more, and be rewarded more by the sheer pleasure of teaching. Power sharing avoids the adversarial relationship that too often comes to characterize the teacher-class relationship. The you-versus-them distinction blurs. Because they no longer feel powerless, they are much less likely to resist your requirements. I have often felt more in control in these classes than I ever did before. Someone once said, Give power away and get more back!

Power sharing affects the environment in the classroom too. Here, the benefits have to do with ownership and comfort. There is a much stronger sense that the class belongs to everyone. When something is ineffective, students are much more willing than in the past to help me fix it. My classes are louder and sometimes seem chaotic. People work in groups, others mill about, and sometimes a pair works something out on the board. I worry more when faculty peers come to observe. One of my students once accosted a peer reviewer, asking what he was doing in the class. He then proceeded to tell my colleague that this class was "unconventional" but that I should not "get in trouble" because it was an excellent class. I listened, simultaneously feeling thrill and horror.

## In the Trenches: Policies and Practices That Redistribute Power

How do you design a course, a set of assignments, and day-by-day classroom activities in ways that give students more control over learning processes? The examples in this section are organized around four areas of potential decision making for learners: course activities and assignments, classroom policies, course content, and evaluation activities.

### Activities and Assignment Decisions

Students can be involved in decision making about course activities and assignments in a number of ways and at different levels of decision making. In my entry-level public speaking course, students decide what assignments they will complete. I have restructured the course so that there are no required assignments save one: students must give one speech. It is, after all, a skills-based course, and although many of my students would aspire to try, public speaking is not a skill developed in theory. But in place of the formerly required assignments is now an array of options from which students pick and choose. (Appendix A contains the syllabus.)

In their first log entry (see the syllabus for details on this assignment; a list of log entry prompts is provided in Appendix A), students make some initial assignment choices and share reactions to the course's structure. Their responses are not very encouraging. They say they plan to do the easy assignments (although they disagree as to which ones those are). They also pick assignments they "like" with little insight as to how these choices might reflect learning preferences. They believe a teacher might design a course this way because "you like students and want to give us a chance," or "you don't want any student blaming you for a bad grade."

However, when I ask, "How do you think this strategy will affect your performance in the class?" I hit pay dirt. "I think this structure will really help me. It puts me in charge." "With this class it's up to me and although that scares me, I really think that's the way it should be." "I'll have to see but I think I'm really going to work hard in this class. I feel like I have a chance."

The design challenge is to give students an authentic role in making decisions about their assignments but to create a context or framework that positively influences the kinds of decisions they make. Given the level of most students' skills, making all the decisions about assignments (not just selecting which ones) could be the pedagogical equivalent of giving a sixteen year old the keys on Friday night and saying, "See you Monday morning." I put student decision making about assignments in the context of a detailed course calendar that we follow religiously. Every assignment has a due date, and once a deadline is past, the assignment cannot be completed. This prevents students from finally getting motivated in week 13 of the semester and in a flurry of activity completing a number of assignments at a questionable quality level. Each assignment itself is highly structured; none allows students much in the way of choice. Letting students make the decision as to what and how many assignments happens in the context of deadlines and structure that my beginning students need.

Assignment decision making has a significant impact on who works in the course and how hard they are willing to work. I have lots of B-level and C-level students—ones the old method never motivated very well—who seem particularly empowered by the fact that in this class, maybe they can get an A, and they are willing to complete a great number of assignments. The assignments are not mastery based, in the sense that those who complete them get the credit. Each assignment is graded against specific criteria, and to have any assignment count, the student must earn at least 50 percent of the points.

Consider a second and quite different example of how students can be involved in decision making about course assignments and activities. One faculty member lets students set all the due dates and deadlines for a major group project in a 300-level business course. After making the assignment (a detailed report that attempts to entice a business to locate a new factory in the county), he asks the group for a memo in which *they* identify the major steps necessary to complete the assignment and when they need to be done in order to meet the final due date, which they propose. They also list assignment parts for which they would like his formative feedback and when they will have those to him. In an especially

interesting twist, he has students identify appropriate penalties should they miss any of the deadlines. He says that frequently, student penalties for missed deadlines are more severe than those he would use and that overall they miss deadlines much less often under this scheme. This approach does result in assignments being submitted at different dates, but this sequencing actually eases the grading task because there is no imposing stack of papers to be graded all at once.

### Course Policy Decisions

Students can also be involved in decision making about course policies. Here I will illustrate with an extended example of how students set the participation policy in my beginning public speaking course, including how their policies compare with mine, how the experience has affected all of us, and what learning outcomes I have observed.

Before I involved students in the process of establishing the policy, I was already convinced that my assessment of student participation needed to be much less subjective and summative. I needed criteria that were more explicit and a design that included a feedback opportunity through which students might learn how to make more constructive contributions. (Lyons, 1989, persuasively illustrates the kind of criteria we ought to be using.) Building on this, I use a round-robin technique to start the class working on the policy. Students are placed in groups of four, and each student is given a different question about participation (for example, "What behaviors should count positively toward participation credit? Should some participation behaviors count more—which ones?" "Should students lose participation credit for engaging in some kinds of behaviors—what behaviors and how much credit should they lose?"). Each student asks every other person in the group his or her question, takes notes on the answers, and responds to the questions that have been given to others.

Next, all persons with the same question form a new group in which they share the responses collected and look for common themes and differences. Their task is to construct a group answer, which they turn in at the end of the period. I respond by the next period with a memo to each group that raises questions and asks

for elaborations. Students work on the issues raised in the memo and by the middle of the period have posted their group's answer to the question. We spend the rest of the time comparing and contrasting the responses and trying to work out areas of disagreement. From their answers and our discussion, I put together a draft of the participation policy. We review it the following period, occasionally revise it further, and then vote on whether to accept it.

In general, students come up with policies that closely parallel the ones I am comfortable using, but not always. I was somewhat taken back when one class proposed that right and wrong answers should count equally. I did not know how to respond. Should I go with what I had promised (implement the policy they proposed), or point out that this was not a realistic or right answer? The next day, I went to class still undecided and honestly shared my quandary. Two student responses persuaded me that I could live with their plank: (1) "When you give a wrong answer and the teacher points that out in front of the entire class, it takes a good deal of courage to raise your hand next time," and (2) "Teachers always tell us we shouldn't be afraid to make mistakes, that we learn from them, so why shouldn't we get credit for making them?"

Student reaction to this activity is always interesting. In almost every class, at least a couple of students see this as some group exercise that has no bearing on reality. The light finally comes on about the time we are ready to vote. As one student blurted out, "Is this, like, for real?"

Much more telling are their repeated attempts to put the ball back in my court. Proposed planks will be decidedly vague—for example, "Students should get credit for trying." When I object, asking how I am supposed to know if students are trying, they promptly respond, "You decide. You're the teacher." I try to force the point by making it extreme: "I'll tell you what. I don't think engineering majors ever try. [I almost always have five or six per class.] I've had lots of them in class before, and I've never seen one try yet. I'm not giving any engineers credit for trying." Their typical response is decidedly naive: "You can't do that. You're the teacher. You have to be fair." "And what in the world can you do if I'm not?" I respond. The notion that a clear, explicit policy might protect them is a new idea.



Finally, every class (close to twenty sections now) has opted for a policy that students will volunteer rather than be called on. I am struck because the most common way faculty solve the nonparticipation problem is by calling on students. What do students learn when we call on them? We assume that they learn they can speak up and therefore speak up more. Recent research challenges that assumption, however.

A study by Howard, Short, and Clark (1996), based on observations in 231 class sessions, found that 28 percent of the students made 89 percent of the comments. Another study (Nunn, 1996) also involving classroom observation documented that on average, only 25 percent of the students in a given class participate. Other evidence documents the still small percentage of class time devoted to interaction and faculty behaviors that inhibit and facilitate student response (Fassinger, 1995, 1996; Auster and MacRone, 1994; these studies and others are summarized and their findings integrated in Weimer, 1996). The findings make clear that calling on students is not solving participation problems.

My answer to what students learn when we call on them has changed. I now think they learn how to speak up when somebody is there to call on them. In my professional life, I have been in many situations where nobody called on me, and had I not been able to speak up, my views and the views of those I represent would not have been heard. Students need to learn how to speak up on their own when they have something to say and when their views and positions need to be heard. How does calling on them teach that lesson?

I now see calling on students as one of those instructional policies that benefit faculty more than students. It is awkward when no one responds to a question we have asked. But we summarily dispense with the discomfort if we promptly call on a student. This policy takes care of our problem, but it creates another set for students—for example, the anxiety of not knowing if they're going to be called on; the pressure to say something when they don't know what to say; the fear of looking foolish because they've given a stupid answer.

Making class participation policy the object of such focused attention (in part justified in my class because it is a communication course) has had the benefit of making students much more

aware of participation on a daily basis. Students see that various behaviors constitute participation: answering questions asked by the teacher and other students, asking questions of the teacher and other students, asking follow-up questions, commenting on the questions and answers of other students, asking questions about the reading or material presented previously, and offering examples or experiences to illustrate. Ironically, in my experience, using the student-developed participation policy has more effectively generated responses to questions than calling on students ever did. On average, about 75 percent of the students select this assignment option, regularly including a number who report that up to now, they have never contributed in class unless called on. Generally, they all participate, and by the end of the course, a significant number of those who have not selected the option have also contributed.

Woods (1996) reports student outcomes similar to what I have experienced in a senior-level engineering class where he had students design the instrument used to assess involvement in discussion. He also involved students in the assessment process. (His experiences are highlighted fully in Chapter Six.)

## Course Content Decisions

Course content offers an especially challenging arena in which to involve students in decision making. The difference between what faculty and students know about the content is so dramatic and compelling that at first pass, it seems irresponsible to give students any voice in course content, to say nothing of impossible, given what we are required to "cover" in the course. We do then justifiably ask whether there are any ways student can be involved in content decisions.

The answer is yes. In fact, we can start with a set of content decisions we already allow students to make. We let them choose speech topics, select subjects for artwork, and write papers, even major research papers, on topics of their own choosing. And most of us can speak firsthand to the difficulties they have deciding on a topic. Often that decision seems motivated not by their interests, but by what they think we want them to choose. It is worth asking ourselves why that so concerns them.



It helps to think of content decision making as a continuum and how we can move further along from the kind of content decisions we are comfortable having students make. I had a teacher who let students determine the content of the review session. The week before the exam, he arrived in class and announced that next Tuesday he would spend the period reviewing for the exam and go over whatever material we identified. He gave us five minutes at the end of the period to write him a note that listed the topics and any specific questions we had about them. On review day, he posted the topics most often requested and proceeded to work with us on them. I must confess that when I started using the technique, it was because it makes the teacher look highly responsive to student needs, but I quickly discovered that it provided me with important feedback about the areas students thought were most important and those they understood least well. What I see now is a technique that responsibly gives students a decision about content.

Chapter Six discusses a variety of strategies faculty use to involve students in the creation of exam questions. The focus there is on enhancing the learning outcome of evaluation activities, but using some student-generated questions is another way of giving them a small but important role in deciding what course content is important. The previous example of entertaining student textbook recommendations provides yet another possibility. If you act on either of these activities, including some student-generated questions on the exam or selecting the textbook they recommend, you will find students take these activities very seriously.

Black (1993) inches still further along the continuum in an organic chemistry course he restructured. He uses the textbook to "cover" the content; he does not give lectures on topics that are explicated in the text, but lets students decide what content gets worked on during in a period. He explains how he gets students to work with text content before they come to class and then describes what happens in class: "Currently, the class is run much like a discussion section. . . . I generally query the students at the beginning of each class to determine what they are having trouble with, and what they want to talk about. From their suggestions we make a list of topics, and during the class I try to address the problems they are having with these topics, perhaps by clarifying and explaining, providing examples, or whatever else I can do to help"

(p. 142). His next comments pertain to what has occurred as a result of this approach: "Interestingly, the course does not collapse when I come in and ask what the students want to talk about, because it is always in the context of the current chapter, and the schedule for working on those chapters is in the syllabus. Going to class each day is a pleasure, and always somewhat different. I am relaxed, enjoy the time, and it shows to the students. I feel no pressure to enter a mad race to cover the material; rather, we work together on what is currently their work" (p. 144). Using a similar approach, Tichenor (1997) reports on student involvement in the design of labs in a physiology course.

Finally, we move forward by yards to the other end of the continuum. Are there any circumstances under which students could make content decisions for a significant portion of the entire course? What about a graduate course, say, on college teaching, one that serves as an elective in a variety of graduate programs? The instructor begins by generating a long list of possible topics for the course. She could at that time identify an appropriate set of readings on each of the topics. The students begin with a short, informal paper that sets out the reasons they are taking the course, what they hope to learn, and what content they think might help them accomplish those learning goals. After writing the paper and sharing it with a small group of fellow students, the group gets the instructor-created list of potential topics. Together, the group uses that list and their papers to construct a prioritized list of course topics. These are submitted, and from them, the teacher selects the topics that will be covered in the course, creates a calendar, and assembles a collection of readings. If the majority interests have ruled out a topic of interest to a particular individual, that person could be encouraged to use an assignment to explore that content area.

### Evaluation Activities

Assessment, long the exclusive purview of faculty, offers yet another challenging arena for involving students in making decisions. (Chapter Six is devoted to the various ways and means of getting students involved in evaluation processes.) The summary example here is of a single activity that gives students the opportunity to

make recommendations about all aspects of the course. Johnson (2000, p. 1) involves students in the development of the entire course syllabus. He explains his motivation: "One principle of learning which has always been important to me as a learner, and as a teacher has application here. Students are very much turned on when they are involved in making the decisions that affect them. The converse is especially poignant. They are turned off when someone else makes their decisions for them." He does prepare a syllabus before class, but the copies he takes to class have *draft* written on the top of the first page. He begins class by having students interview each other as to what they most want to learn from the course. They share what others have told them, and Johnson writes what he hears on newsprint. Next, he distributes the draft syllabus and charges small groups to answer this question, "Building on your own needs, the results of our interviews, and my commitment to include your input, how would you revise the course?" Students may propose revisions to any part of the syllabus, the goals and objectives, the content, teaching methods, assignments, and proposed evaluation procedures. Johnson reports they make a variety of suggestions, many of them excellent: "I cannot recall a case where the students tried to find the easy way out, or to water down the course" (p. 1). He carefully considers their input and then revises the syllabus to include as many of their recommendations as he feels he justifiably can. He ends up with a syllabus jointly created and owned with the class. This example and others in this section are illustrations of how students can responsibly be given some control over the learning processes that affect them.

### Questions That Emerge When the Balance of Power Changes

Out of this exploration of power sharing come a number of significant and important questions. We have already asked the most fundamental one: Can you design a set of course activities and assignments that responsibly give students more control over the decisions that affect their learning? I let the variety of examples offered stand as my answer to that question. Out of experience and the examples in the previous section emerge three other questions, and within each of them is a subset of related questions. For all

these questions, I have much less concrete answers. However, if we have interest in moving forward our understanding and the effective use of learner-centered instruction, then these questions merit consideration.

### How Much Power Is Enough?

If having power (some voice in decision making) motivates learners, how much does it take? Individual instructors can answer that question for themselves by sharing some power with students and seeing when their motivation and involvement in the course change. But we need more than individual answers. We need principles and guidelines that will help to establish professional norms and standards.

The question of how much power is enough leads to some related questions. First is how much decision making might be required to motivate one student versus how much it takes to motivate the class. In my own practice, I believe I have redistributed enough to motivate most students, but I am not reaching all students. I still have students who fail. They choose not to work or do such a minuscule amount of work that they do not learn enough to pass the class. I regularly wonder how much of their failure is a function of the way I have structured the course.

Students whose motivation and involvement are affected differently by this kind of decision making raise the final question related to power sharing. Can we give decision making differentially? That is, what are the implications of giving more to some students and less to others? Does that violate the principle of fair and equitable treatment for all students? Is it pragmatically possible, especially if the class is large?

### How Much Freedom Can They Handle?

The answer to this question closely links to the previous one. The amount of decision making it takes to motivate students must be weighed against their intellectual maturity and ability to operate in conditions that give more freedom at the same time they also require more responsibility. Most students arrive in college classrooms having made almost no decisions about learning. We have

an educational system that successfully creates very dependent learners (this is explored much more in Chapter Five). They turn to us for all manner of decision making. "How many pages should the paper be?" "How many homework problems do you think I need to do?" "Is it okay if I include more than five sources?" The questions annoy us, but we need to recognize that part of their need to know arises from an inability to decide for themselves.

In addition, many students are missing the solid study skills that would inform good learning decisions. In one of my log entries, I have students develop a plan for studying for an upcoming exam. It involves a time line and list of activities they will do to prepare for the exam. I am always amazed by the number who report that this is the first time they have developed a review plan. I am further dismayed after the exam by an equal number who report that the plan had no influence on their behavior. As usual, they waited until the night before the exam and crammed.

With little experience making learning decisions and lacking the sophisticated study skills that characterize effective learners, the chance that students (especially beginning ones) will make poor learning choices is high. What then is the teacher's responsibility? Should we intervene or let them live with the consequences of their decisions and hope they will learn from their mistakes? I routinely have students who participate regularly in class, doing everything the class participation policy requires for points, but they did not select this assignment option. I query them and point out how their contributions are precisely the ones called for by the policy. Most readily admit they made a mistake. I do not let them add the option after the fact, but I wonder if that is the right decision.

Clearly, there are developmental issues in moving students along the continuum from being dependent to independent learners. In Chapter Eight, I address those issues in detail, but the conclusion there is relevant here. Many details of the development process remain unclear. For example, we know very little about how to sequence assignments and learning experiences so they move students forward, always constructively pushing them but not so much that their decision making ends up being compromised. But figuring that out is not easy or obvious.

Finally, the issue of the class and the individual arises again with the question of how much freedom they can handle. Not all stu-

dents in a class are at the same level of intellectual maturity, so some may be able to handle more responsibility than others. The goal is to find about the right level for the majority of the class—what most students can handle. But that still leaves the question of individuals unable to function at that level. I had one student who failed because he had about twenty-five fewer points than he needed to pass. He came to see me the next semester surprised and dismayed that he had failed. "How many points did you have?" I asked. "I don't know. I never added them up. But if I had known I was short, I would have done more work." I pondered this situation for quite a while after he left. Should I be distributing point totals to students throughout the semester? I give them a grid on which to record their points. Every time I return an assignment, I remind them that it is their responsibility to keep track of where they stand in the class. I have all their points recorded, but I add them up only at the end of course. What responsibility does the teacher have to an individual student when his or her capacity to handle learner-centered approaches is at a different level from the rest of the class?

### When Do Teachers Compromise Professional Responsibilities?

The question of the teacher's responsibility for the individual student leads directly to the issue of how much control and decision making can be shared with students before compromising the responsibilities associated with being the teacher. How do you know when you have crossed the line?

Those who write about self-directed, autonomous learners see teachers ultimately phased out of the learning process. Nevertheless, most students are years, if not decades, away from having the skills and intellectual maturity necessary to assume responsibility for their own learning. But the point of that literature is that ultimately there are no responsibilities currently assigned the teacher that cannot at some point be relinquished to learners. So we compromise professional responsibility not by what we hand over but when we make that transfer.

However, given our discussion of where we start with most students, there are areas where teachers need to retain some control, perhaps significant control. I have already alluded to some of

these. As long as grades are used as gatekeepers to subsequent educational experiences, like graduate and professional schools, teachers must not lose control of the major components of the assessment process. Given the way the curriculum (especially the undergraduate curriculum) is organized, including sequencing courses and using courses in a major to accomplish designated purposes, teachers cannot let students be completely (or perhaps even significantly) in charge of course content. And given our discussion of student preparedness to deal with more decision making and its incumbent responsibility, teachers need to retain control over the design and structure of course activities and assignments.

The question of knowing when the line has been crossed is easy in extreme cases. I once had to find a replacement for an ill faculty member. Students strongly objected to the newcomer. They wanted the policies of the previous teacher continued. "We get to grade our own group work," they said. I did not understand and asked, "You mean you assess what the other groups do and then the teacher reviews that when group grades are assigned?" "No, we grade the other groups, and those are the grades." "What do you use for criteria?" I wondered. "We just give them the grade they deserve." "Do you ever give groups less than C's?" "No, we only give A's and B's." Clearly this teacher inappropriately transferred decision making.

In the less extreme cases, it is more difficult to see where the line is, and so it helps to keep questioning ourselves about our ethical responsibilities. I must be honest, though, and confess that this part of the issue I do not find particularly worrisome. Most faculty control decision making about learning so completely that the possibility that they will transfer too much power too quickly seems remote. It reminds me of those faculty members forever fearful that if they tell a joke, they will cross the line and "entertain" students, thereby totally compromising their credibility as educators. Most faculty can only dream of careers in entertainment, regardless of how many jokes they might tell in class.

That all of these questions are related is clear; much less clear are definitive answers to them. At best, I have hinted at some answers and encourage their continued exploration in the context of individual practice and empirical inquiry. What I have illustrated

is how this change in instructional practice raises important and intriguing questions that if answered first individually and then collectively can take our understanding of learner-centered teaching to a new and deeper level.

### To Finish Up

Learner-centered instruction involves a reallocation of power in the classroom. It requires that faculty give students some control over those learning processes that directly affect them. And this reallocation does require a change. In most college classrooms, power, authority, and control remain firmly and almost exclusively in the hands of teachers. It is part of what continues to make instruction very teacher centered and what makes many students disinterested in learning. We have explored ways of involving students in these decisions, ways that responsibly deal with students' lack of experience and preparedness to make learning decisions, and ways that allow faculty to meet their professional obligations. The power issues involved in teaching are pervasive, subtle, and intriguing. They merit careful analysis as we seek to use power to affect learning outcomes more positively.