

# Power, Manipulation and Control in a Community of Inquiry

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**I**n a previous paper, we introduced the notion of pedagogical imposition, and argued for its importance in understanding the psychodynamics of CI. Practitioners of CI usually define themselves as engaged in a liberatory pedagogy - that is, a form of teaching which avoids imposition on or manipulation of students. This paper will argue that, if we view the classroom as a system, this is a naive assumption. This argument is based, in turn, on our assumption that, first, any interactive system involves relations of power; and second, that any specifically pedagogical system involves unequal relations of power. But our argument will go further, and claim that in fact that in any system, relations of power are always ambiguous and shifting. Power may be exercised coercively or subversively, but any equilibrium which pretends to finality presupposes either stagnation of the system or its death.

Community of inquiry as both a conceptual and a psychodynamic form, is a pedagogical methodology which, far more than traditional educational forms, models its self-understanding, its goals and its strategies, on systems theory<sup>1</sup> and to this extent it is a form of «nurture» which models itself on «nature.» But to the extent to which it denies or ignores the elements of power which operate within it, it is modeled on an expurgated or «politically correct» «nature,» and thereby finds itself back in the camp of the model from which it seeks to distinguish itself. Therefore we wish to explore how power works in a community of inquiry - not in order to paralyze it with a hermeneutics of suspicion, but in fact to optimistically affirm the transformative character of a dialectics of power. We may even go so far as to say that when we speak normatively of a form of «democratic practice» in groups, or of an «ideal speech situation,» we are expressing what we sense are the intrinsic goals of any social system, including the social situation of a classroom. We seek to uncover how power works in the classroom in order to - as best we can - allow it, not suppress it.

Since we are dealing with dialectics, we begin with a thesis: community of inquiry as a methodology removes impositional and manipulative forms of power from the classroom. The antithesis: community of inquiry as a methodology is just as impositional and manipulative as traditional methodologies, but masks it through apparently non-manipulative techniques. CI facilitators begin, like traditional ones, with the assumption that children are imperfect or deficient in their ability to reason, to analyze and judge contexts, and to self-correct. The CI facilitator is not likely to admit this purported deficiency publicly, but

employs a pedagogical procedure which, in that it is designed to correct it, therefore assumes it. The dynamics of this corrective process have as their goal the «strengthening of judgment,» and they are typically - in the form it takes in Philosophy for Children anyway - as follows:

1) The facilitating philosopher undertakes a preliminary analysis of the nature of the deficiency, then creates a text - in the form of a narrative—designed to correct it. The text is adapted in a manner in which the philosophical concepts are easily grasped. 2) This adapted text is presented to the group as a whole. 3) The moment of pedagogical manipulation proper is accomplished through not only reading the text, but also through obliging the students - whom the teacher has analyzed in terms of both individual and age differences—to ask questions which give her an opportunity to a) cross their motivational boundaries; and b) create a «safe» atmosphere. As these steps are carried out, conditions are created for even more serious manipulation in the direction of (i) mastering the already presented material, and (ii) testing the quality of its assimilation. The most common way in which this is done is to offer a set of exercises to complete. By definition this pedagogic technique presupposes that a child must act according to the teacher's instruction. 4) When the teacher has made sure that the material has been mastered, she may be certain that the type of thinking modeled in the text has internalized by the child.

The CI teacher manipulates the way a fisherman manipulates his prey. After an analysis of the kind of fish (student) he is planning to catch, he chooses a certain bait (academic material). Then he looks for favorable weather conditions (a psychological microclimate) for fishing. A «good» fisherman may also actively create favorable conditions for the catch by utilizing a direct lure (methods of psychological manipulative conditioning for instance, by encouragement (positive conditioning) or punishment (negative), or both). At the moment in which all these well-constructed conditions are administered, the fish has no alternative but to swallow the bait. If the bait consists of methods of logical thinking, the child masters these. If the bait consists of the mastery of the methods of fishing - i.e. directive and non-directive forms of manipulation - the child masters the skills which the teacher himself is presenting.

Thus the antithesis. But if we examine it closely enough, it too begins to shift into something else. For if we look closely at the interactive dynamics either of fishing or of teaching, we realize that it is actually impossible to impose something on either a child, an adult or a fish without his or her more or less active participation. In order to impose at all, the teacher/imposer must consider the person of the imposed-upon. If not, a situation of resistance is created, and the teacher cannot be sure that the text is even read in any but the most mechanical and uncomprehending way by the student. Moreover, s/he can be sure neither of the student's eventually mastering the material, nor of any degree of personal development. For instance, the student may accept the reading or the problematization tasks as purely practical and literal - as a way of playing the teacher's game. She can succeed in the game just as well by asking questions from within the zone of her actual development as from her zone of proximal development. In this case, she has accomplished a task which can be done without the teacher's help. The task is carried out formally with no resulting change of state. The material is literally done away with.

In order to avoid this, it is important for the would-be imposer not only to present the academic material, but also to be extremely sensitive and receptive to the student's manner of reading the text and asking questions. It means to redefine, with every step, the material so as to correspond with the sphere of the student's meaning. One can imagine how powerful must be the teacher's skill in order to listen and speak in

such a way as to accomplish this. For this reason, a better metaphor for evoking the pedagogical skills of a good teacher might be—rather than fishing—the activity of a pilot in an extreme situation. The pilot both acts and reacts - imposes and imposes upon. Relations of power are never unilateral - to imagine so is to court disaster.

The student is also involved in pedagogical manipulation - also trying to «catch» the teacher. The more pedagogically resistant—that is to say awkward, inflexible, insensitive, inert—the teacher is, the harder is the process of mastering the material, and the more resourceful and creative the student must be. The implication of this reversal is that both parties in the relationship - the teacher and the student - must sincerely accept the alternative models which each one carries, and consider it as equal to his or her own. Only in this case is there is no place for the unilateral imposition of the material. If both are understood as engaged in creative manipulation, in a context of equality, outward manipulation turns into deep communication on the level of basic meanings, dispositions, and values.

Therefore, the image of teacher-manipulator - the one who appears to know where to go and what to do - ultimately fails in explaining the phenomenon of pedagogical action. If the teacher is to successfully impose her own model she must not impose it—she has to assimilate the model of the student, which means confronting and overcoming her own resistance as much as the student's. In fact in this context, resistance turns out to be the only condition common to both - although this very resistance is the driving force in their search to define their own individual positions. Unless this mutual resistance is to some extent a form of mutual identification, it will stand for only one thing: «My model is different from yours, and so we'll go our separate ways.» To get to know the position of the other well, one must, at least partially, share it, become its quasi-subject, which means changing one's own position. The question then is (and remains), who is manipulating whom? Whose view is imposed, and upon whom imposed? In fact given the complications which gather around the concept of manipulation, and its expansion into more of a field-phenomenon than a form of conscious intentionality, we find ourselves obliged to drop a term whose referent has outgrown it, and substitute a descriptor taken from systems theory - «diverse» or ambiguous control. This term refers to the observation that systems tend to resist one permanent locus of control, and in fact that all elements are engaged in continually shifting relations of power, i.e. in the emergence and working out of discrepancies in the realm of agency, of activity/passivity of role, and of free or constrained energy states. Each element of an open system is at one moment or another attempting to impose its energy or direction - i.e. to control the system— but no one element is ultimately able to do so, or the system would no longer be an open one. Thus, the more an element plays with the shifting power relations rather than attempting to freeze them, the more effective it becomes in moving the system forward - by which we understand facilitating its inherent drive for positive transformation. No element can relinquish the attempt to control any more than it can take complete control—hence the term «ambiguity.» The «expert» element in a system is one which approaches the ideal of the «master» in Lao-Tsu - which acts through not acting and when it acts, appears that it has not. To call this «manipulation» or «imposition» is to neglect the fact that, while all elements of the system are necessarily self-preoccupied, they succeed best in imposing their energy through understanding themselves as at play with rather than in conflict with other elements of the system. Play implies fluidity, negotiation, a hypothetical stance, a virtual («as if») way of being and acting, and a multilogical rather than a monological style of approach and interaction. It implies the understanding that the expression of each element with its particular form and style of control is necessary to the system as a whole.

Given this situation of ambiguity and implicit dialogue of perspectives, we cannot guarantee that the pedagogical process will be effective - for one if not both of the participants in this bilateral process. Both the teacher and the student will be exposed to a process which includes the initial defense of one's own position (imposition); confrontation - that is to say the altering or even destruction of one's previously held model through identifying with the position of the other; and, it is hoped, transcendence to a shared paradigm. This leads us to formulate a few broad generalizations about the phenomenon of pedagogical ambiguous control.

First, it is ecological in the sense that it recognizes a multiplicity of mutually interactive perspectives in any given context, and operates in such a way that it does not destroy any of those perspectives, nor does it attempt to do away with their inherent contradictions - for to do so would destroy the ecosystem. Ecological action and interaction, although it is based on the recognition of contradiction and the confrontation of perspectives, is a preservative one. Confrontation leads, not to a unilateral imposition of one perspective, but to the transformation of the whole system to a new level of development. It leaves all elements of the ecosystem intact but different. Secondly, this process of dialectical transformation of the system is irreversible, and thus never returns to a previous level of organization. If this were the case, it would represent systemic stagnation.

Third, open-system process is only partially predictable, i.e. predictable only in the sense of the multiple possibilities it offers. Since it is a poly-dimensional system, its surface elements, the moment they enter communication - in this case between teacher and student - are immediately transformed into a third thing. Their combination is not an additive one - they create a new whole which is only relatively predictable on the basis of analyzing each element before its integration with the other. There are also non-surface elements which enter into each exchange, and thus increase unpredictability. For instance, the student may be carrying introjects from past experience - former pedagogical impositions for example - which comprise an element in the communication, and alter the emergent whole.

Finally, the ecological process is non-linear. The whole system can be altered by the influence of minor effects. For example, in an educational situation, the logical structures of one individual may not coincide with the logic of the whole system. What for one individual may represent merely an aspect of the current state of the system may, for another, represent an element which triggers its transformation. What seems minor for one may be «the last straw» for another. A system which appears to be far from transformation may re-organize in the following moment, and visa versa - a system which appears primed for transformation may hang in a state of stagnation indefinitely.

Thus, the phenomenon of pedagogical manipulation reveals itself, on closer scrutiny, to be an element of a larger pedagogical system which has inherent ecological properties - it is polydimensional, emergent, irreversible, non-linear and unpredictable. Since it is non-hierarchical and self-organizing, the differences in authority and influence between student and the teacher are not determinative of the system's movement - although they can be icons of its stagnation. Surface elements share transformative power with non-surface elements, and elements which are present and literal with «non-present» elements like hidden assumptions, introjects and projections.

In a pedagogical context, we may say that the continuous movement of an open, self-organizing ecological system is the movement of critical thinking itself - that to this extent they are isomorphic. In the specific pedagogical context of community of inquiry, we can follow Vygotsky and Lipman in describing the process of learning as the internalization by each element of the system of the movement of the system as a whole. From the perspective of the system as a whole, the whole group as a collective subject is reorganizing and in the process constructing new meanings which are internalized, i.e. shared, by each individual. This communicative process functions through «mutual imposition,» which is as much to say, creative or ecological manipulation - which is as much as to say, ambiguous control.

### MISTAKES AND SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

One very significant phenomenon in the process of ecological transformation described above is the «mistake.» This is especially clear in educational situations, where the mistake is understood - even in traditional systems, which understand themselves as linear, predictable, and reversible - as the crucial moment in the instructional process. But when education is understood from an ecological perspective and in terms of open systems, the «mistake» can be seen as a key trigger for transformation - with the difference that in an open system, which understands itself, whatever the outward appearances, as non-hierarchical, it is equally possible and likely for teachers to make mistakes as students. Once this possibility is recognized and allowed to surface within the discursive system, education comes to be understood as a multi-logical system of possibilities rather than crude monological imposition.

The main function of an academic situation is that of presenting to the student a certain model of a correct or exemplary action. In the situation of academic evaluation, the communicator of the model is the teacher who is qualified as an expert. (On the other hand in the situation of professional development there will always be another professional who possesses a more precise or complete model of professional behavior/actions). In this situation, a mistake is an action or response which does not conform to a certain model of behavior. In so far as not only students make mistakes mature professionals do, too, but also amateurs who learn things for pleasure we may speak about a mistake as a mediator—not only of academic situations, but also that of any transformation, be it in the realm of professional, maturational, or personal development.

In any situation of transformation - whether professional or academic—there is a moment of communication between the transformed and the transformer, the evaluated and the evaluator. One of them expresses either verbally or nonverbally a certain meaning to the other one through a comparison of behavior and model. Should there be a discrepancy between the two, an erroneous status is attributed to the actions of one or the other. This attribution actually constitutes a perspective, in the sense that it is a whole-system state in which some inequality is understood to exist between its members. This inequality is interpreted as the superiority of the standard or the model which currently governs the system over some element of the system. In a situation in which a hierarchy of models cannot be established, and no one element of the system can be characterized as «expert» in relation to another - or if no element of the system is willing to perform the function of «expert» (which could be understood as meaning that expertise is distributed through the system, and is present at some moment and to some degree in each element) - then to characterize a behavior as a mistake is impossible.

If we assume that the achievement a transformative result within the system depends on the emergence of a perspective of evaluation - that is, pointing to a mistake - and of correction - or elimination of the mistake - then the mistake becomes the foremost, or leading element in the system - the one which moves it in the direction of transformation. For example when a mistake occurs in an educational situation, the teacher corrects the student's behavior, and adds to the latter the elements that are missing from the point of view of his pedagogical model. But if the teacher's pedagogical action fails to take the full parameters of the student's behavior into consideration - if the student is resisting the teacher for example - then the content and structure of the teacher's pedagogical model is open to question, and it is it is the teacher him or herself who is faced with the need for correction. In the first case, the teacher is the «expert,» in the second, the student. In either case, transformation is impossible unless there is a definition of the boundaries of correctness of the behavior, for only through this clarification of boundaries does the possibility for transformation of the system emerge. Thus understood, a mistake is an indicator of the boundaries of a possible action. For example If the driver of an automobile is guided by the «zone of a possible mistake» n the roadside—he is able to make corrections in his driving before he faces a problem. And if in an academic situation a student is given a precise enough algorithm with which to solve a certain problem, he can predict that the solution will follow.

In a situation of a conflict between models—when no element of the system can take full responsibility for the direction of development and transformation—a situation of ambiguity/uncertainty appears. When this occurs, each element of the system is inclined to interpret the situation as an evaluative one - there is ambiguity as to which element is making the mistake. In this situation, which we would claim, is potentially present in every academic system, there is a need - always felt if not acknowledged - for a transformation of the existing models of evaluation, and a redefinition of the boundaries of possible action.

If each element of the system fails to grasp or conform to the model as understood, then the direction of development - driven by the ambiguity of the boundaries—is toward collective transcendence and reconfiguration of the system. In this case, a «mistake» comes to be redefined as the pretext and possibility of the collective reconstruction of a new evaluative model. As with any other reconstruction, the formation of a new model begins with the delineation and expression of the referent conditions - i.e. the clarification of each separate model within the system. Each member of an academic group, for example, is then obliged reflect on, represent to him or herself, and attempt to communicate his or her evaluative model to the other members. Each representation is interpreted in terms of the others', and a process of reconfiguration begins, resulting in the emergence of a model which at least approximates each individual model to the others. This process of mutual interpretation, if allowed its direction by the hierarchical power elements within the system - most obviously the teacher, but possibly also a single student or a group of students - results in a situation where «expertise» becomes distributed throughout the group rather than residing in one or a few members. As such, it could be seen as the primary and most important element in the transition from a monological to a dialogical educational situation.

In summary, there is no such thing as a mistake in an ecological system. In such a system, a mistake is in fact a transitional form - a moment of the emergence of a discrepancy which acts as a trigger for transformation. As such, the mistake shows the boundaries of the possible within the system. It acts to redirect the transformational process of the system - in this case the community of inquiry- into a more appropriate developmental zone, one which readies the system as a whole for yet another step.

Lipman alluded to this process when he pointed out, through an analogy with physics, that any form of resistance is an occasion for «work» (oral communication, February 2001). In community of inquiry, that work is the work of reason, or, as he calls a style of reason which is creative and caring as well as critical, «reasonableness.» Once the teacher understands that the mistake is not a failure of the system but one of its transitional forms, he or she is forced to attempt to deal with the mistake, not as a failure to adhere to a model, but as an opportunity for the model to transform into a more adequate one - i.e. more context-sensitive and more communicative. The mistake brings the model into the crisis through which it transforms towards greater adequacy. It is the loss of control which triggers this transformation; therefore it is a prime instance of ambiguous control - through losing control, the teacher regains control on a higher level. In a certain sense we could say that the teacher asserts control over an open system not by discouraging or correcting mistakes, but by encouraging them. Yet this form of control, in that it functions to enhance the system as a whole. Whereas a closed system demands unambiguous control - domination - for completion, open systems flourish through the implicit recognition that power is fluid, pervasive, dynamic, and every-shifting. Although hierarchies are always present - for they represent difference - any hierarchy is temporary.

The dialogical/ecological classroom is one in which there is continual struggle - at its best a «happy» struggle. It is the struggle which ensues from the reality of imposition - the reality that in the moment at which difference emerges in the system, two elements are in an impositional relation. This applies to curriculum, to pedagogy, and to interpersonal relations as well. But it is in the nature of the system that complete imposition by any one element is impossible - for an element to accomplish this would mean either the end of it or its transformation into another element. This is the irony and sometimes the tragedy of closed systems. The master exercises complete control over the system of which he is a part - there is no other element which doesn't obey his rule. As a result he either stagnates and dies, or exercises control on himself, and thereby changes into something else. We may draw the analogy between traditional educational form, which models itself on closed systems, and dialogical, or as Freire characterizes it, «problem-posing» education. The latter is a dialectical advance of the former; that is, every closed system either transforms or self-destructs - although it can stay, we would suppose, in a condition of stagnation indefinitely.

Education as a cultural form is in an epochal moment - the moment of transformation between closed and open system. Since an open system is ecological, this transition may sometimes be hard to see, for an ecological system can make use of any element, however diverse, as long as all elements are in a process of mutuality and interaction. Hence what appear to be manipulative and impositional forms - elements of the closed system - may appear to keep the same general character when the system transforms to an open one, but their significance has changed completely, for they are now elements of a system characterized by ambiguous control. They now succeed only to the extent that the whole system succeeds, which demands that they welcome imposition by other elements rather than attempt whole-system dominance.

Power is never absent from any system - closed or open. Control and the manipulation it implies are as fundamental to human system dynamics as energy is to physical systems. For community of inquiry theorists and practitioners to presume to remove or even to equalize it - whether through ignoring it or attempting to proceduralize it through excessive protocol - is to risk its return to a closed system, where unidirectional and ritualized power, whether overt or covert, is in fact the musculature of its closure. The open system guards us from the abuse of power which the closed system represents because it is a psychosocial ecosystem, in which every element is essential to every other, however diverse. Unlike natural ecosystems, relations of power in the human ecosystem are fluid and in continual reconstruction - often following moments of polarization or stagnation. It is the exploration of this continual reconstruction - its limits and possibilities - which is, perhaps, the most noble and distinctive characteristic of the human project.

## NOTES

1. systems theory inquires into the nature of open systems as chaotic, emergent, self-correcting and self-organizing. Open systems are characterized by incalculable and scarcely predictable interaction with the environment and non-linear and irreversible change and reorganization. The latter is not reduced to building and integrating, but by splitting, extenuation, tangles, asymmetries, attenuations, etc.

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