

**Student-Faculty Power/Knowledge Relations:
The implications of the internet in the College of Education,
Sultan Qaboos University**

*Hamood Al-Harhi
Sultan Qaboos University*

*Mark B. Ginsburg
University of Pittsburgh*

Abstract

The study examines the experiences of professors and undergraduate students at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman in using the Internet in relation to their courses. The focus is on whether and how such use intersects with the traditional form of student-faculty power/knowledge relations. The findings indicate that the existence of the Internet and even its use by professors and students have not changed the existing structure of student-faculty power/knowledge relations. This is the case because the Internet is perceived as just another, less-valued source of knowledge. Faculty control over knowledge evaluation and selection and student regulation discourages students from going beyond knowledge selected by faculty, at least in relation to coursework. The study concludes that the availability of the Internet alone cannot change existing student-faculty power/knowledge relations in Sultan Qaboos University; a restructuring of the institution - and society - defined processes of student evaluation, teaching methods, and selection of curriculum knowledge is also required.

Introduction

A key feature of educational settings is the nature of student-faculty power/knowledge relations, that is, the degree to which faculty and/or students control the selection, evaluation, organization, and transmission of knowledge. In traditional power/knowledge relations professors and teachers exercise unquestioned authority to control curriculum content and their students; this authority, which is granted either directly or by delegation from religious or government officials, is based on their recognized position as the "most knowledgeable" or "the expert" in the society. As Freire (1970) explains, with respect to what he terms a "banking" form of education, the teacher/professor acts to deposit knowledge in students, while the students are simply the passive recipients of this transaction, because it is assumed that "the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher talks and the students listen - meekly" (Freire, 1970: 58- 59).

Historically, in Oman, the context of this research, the authority of teachers in traditional Islamic schools (madares) came from an appreciation of teachers as the holders of knowledge, including the knowledge of prophets. This appreciation resulted in teachers having absolute authority over students (but not autonomy vis-à-vis religious leaders) to decide what was right for their students, including the information that did and did not need to be learned. In this context, education focused on the Qur'an and other religious texts, knowledge was treated as given by Allah, and teaching and learning emphasized

memorization¹. This curricular and pedagogical approach continued even after the introduction of "modern" Western (particularly British) models of schooling in 1970. Thus, Oman has maintained a "banking" form of education in primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions.

However, such traditional student-faculty power/knowledge relations in higher education institutions such as Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) may now be facing significant challenges due to increased access to the Internet in Oman. Besides being a means of communication, the Internet is an alternative source of knowledge, one that may be used by students to challenge professorial authority as the ultimate (or sole) knowledge base. Although other sources of knowledge existed before the Internet, such as family, mass media, daily interaction, or libraries, the Internet potentially poses a special challenge to the authority of professors' knowledge (and the knowledge included in the texts they assign). This is because the Internet is more up-to-date and an "open," "shared" source of knowledge that "is mostly about people finding their voice, speaking for themselves in a public way. In this view, the Internet is less about content and information and more about new relationships to content and information" (Kenway, 1996: 222).

In contrast to universities in the pre-Internet era, where typically the professors (or religious or government officials) selected, organized, and evaluated a narrow range of content, interpreted through a particular perspective, and the students did or did not absorb that content, the Internet potentially provides students with a broader range of content and multiple perspectives. The issue not only pertains to selecting content but also to producing and disseminating knowledge about students' realities. For instance, the library could also function as an "open" source of knowledge and as a basis for questioning and challenging the teacher/professor as a source of knowledge, if students were left on their own to use books. However, the library, in contrast to the Internet, lacks a mechanism enabling students to produce and distribute their own knowledge. Consequently, besides being a source of knowledge, the Internet could also be a model for all people to construct and disseminate knowledge in "temporary" forms (via email and chat rooms) and in more "permanent" forms (via postings on personal websites). This may change students' relations with teachers/professors by giving them access to both independent sources of knowledge and independent channels to construct and distribute knowledge. As a result, the Internet can be seen as a means for social transformation of student-faculty power/knowledge relations (Goodenow, 1996).

However, depending upon the way the Internet's use is socially constructed by faculty and students, it might turn out not to be a transformative instrument, but rather it may function to maintain existing power/knowledge relations. For instance, the faculty might organize their courses so that the Internet is used to replicate traditional teacher/professor control over what content students learn and how the learning of that content is evaluated (Dhanarajan, 2000). Furthermore, students on their own might use the Internet in this way because they recognize - and perhaps accept - the evaluative role of the faculty. Haddad (2000), for example, argues that the Internet alone will not change the current structure of student-faculty power/knowledge relations because the Internet is just a tool. The issue is not just whether students have access to the Internet, but how

its use is organized and evaluated in the context of student-faculty power/knowledge relations.

To explore these issues, an ethnographic study was conducted examining how faculty and students in Mathematics Education and Social Studies Education programs at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman use the Internet in relation to their courses. The focus was on whether and how this use intersects with the traditional form of student-faculty power/knowledge relations. Specifically, this study addressed the following questions:

- 1- How do professors define their roles in relation to students with respect to knowledge selection, organization, and evaluation?
- 2- How do students define their roles in relation to professors with respect to knowledge selection, organization, and evaluation?
- 3- How do professors and students conceptualize and utilize the Internet in relation to their courses? Why?

Theoretical Framework

As opposed to the more common understanding of power as overt force, Foucault (1978, 1979, 1980) sees power as disciplinary. According to Foucault (1978), "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And it is simply the over-all effect, which determines our movements" (p.93). Power as discipline may be exercised through knowledge. Foucault (1980) states that "[t]he exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects." (p.52)

According to Foucault (1979), power and knowledge work together in each society through a "regime of truth," which distinguishes the discourses that are accepted and function as truth and those that are not accepted and considered to be false. Taking traditional student-faculty relations as an example, faculty members are understood discursively to have the authority to determine who can make true statements and what kind of statements are taken as true. Thus, faculty members have the power to fix the flow of meaning and define students (Criab, 1992).

Faculty exercise power over students in schools and universities by using various instruments of disciplinary control, such as observing student behaviors and performance as well as establishing and implementing, regulations and evaluation procedures (e.g., examinations) to stratify and label students (Ball, 1990). For instance, Gore (1998) observed that the techniques of power, including surveillance, normalization, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualization, totalization, and regulation or examination, operated in a variety of sites of pedagogical practice (high school physical education classes, first-year teacher education program, a feminist reading club, and a women's discussion group).

One way to understand the web of power relations in educational settings is to examine how curricular knowledge is constructed. According to Eggleston (1977), the construction of curriculum occurs through:

processes of interaction, often hidden, that bring about ... a selection of curricular content ... that is remarkably consistent and predictable. Essentially they are processes of conflict that give rise to a range of compromises, adjustment and points of equilibrium of varying degrees of stability. In all these negotiations [power is] an underlying concept [operating at] two levels. [The first is] the power to make decisions that influence the work of students and [faculty]. [The second is] the control over ... [what] can be achieved by students or withheld from them by determining access to high or low status curricular components and the evaluation and opportunities associated with them. (p.23)

According to Young (1971), the power of some to define what is "valued" knowledge leads to problems of accounting for how knowledge is "stratified" and by what criteria. Stratification of knowledge means that certain knowledge is highly valued and other knowledge less valued or even devalued. As a consequence of this stratification, the holders/transmitters of different knowledge are also esteemed or depreciated with respect to their ranking or specialty (Bourdieu, 1988).

The impact of knowledge stratification on student-faculty relations can be seen, according to Young (1971), in that if knowledge is highly stratified, there will be clear definitions of what is taken to count as knowledge which will provide the criteria for deciding what knowledge to include and exclude in curricula. It would follow, then, that highly stratified curriculum models are likely to presuppose and legitimate a rigid hierarchy between faculty and students. On the other hand, if knowledge is not highly stratified, then some access to knowledge control by the students would be implied, and the processes of exclusion and selection would become open for modification and change.

Bernstein's (1975) concept of knowledge framing is relevant here. Knowledge framing refers to the nature of the context in which knowledge is transmitted and received. It is the degree of control faculty and/or students possess over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of knowledge transmission and reception in pedagogical relationships. In other words, framing affects student-faculty power/knowledge relations. "[It] control[s] the dissemination of educational knowledge, and the form of the knowledge transmitted. In this way, principles of power and social control are realized through educational knowledge codes and, through the codes, enter into and shape consciousness" (Bernstein, 1975: 94). This means that despite the fact that some may argue that students possess knowledge, at least their personal or local community knowledge, faculty control over the selection and evaluation of classroom knowledge may lead to students' knowledge being defined as illegitimate and thus unusable even by students themselves (Dunn, 1986).

Recognizing the pervasiveness of knowledge stratification and of a strong framing of educational knowledge, however, should not lead us to the assumption that no alternatives to this situation exist. Young (1998), for example, suggests that it is possible for curriculum to be based on differentiated but not stratified knowledge and for curriculum knowledge to be seen as problematic (i.e., socially constructed) rather than simply given and passively accepted, and it "can therefore be transformed" (p.21).

Additionally, Kreisberg (1992) promotes an alternative to the traditional student-faculty power/knowledge relations, what he labels "power-with" relations, which are characterized by collaboration, sharing, and mutuality. Power-with relations in education may be achieved by a "collaborative learning approach," based on a non-foundational, socially constructed understanding of knowledge (see Bruffee, 1993). In this approach, students work together on focused but open-ended tasks that teach them to depend on each other as sources of knowledge rather than depending exclusively on the teacher (or teacher selected texts) as the only authoritative source of knowledge. According to Bruffee (1993), by engaging in this collaborative learning, students learn to construct knowledge as it is constructed by scholars in academic disciplines and professional fields. Power-with student-faculty relations may also be organized through what Gitlin et al. (1992) term "educative research." According to these authors, one of the reasons for the hierarchical relations between university professors and students is the former group's ability to conduct systematic research, thus giving them the "right" to define what is and what is not legitimate knowledge. Gitlin et al. argue that any change away from the traditional form of relations between students and university professors must begin by involving both groups in "educative research," where both have a say in setting the agenda or topic and all have the potential to benefit and learn from the experience.

Generally speaking, the above alternative seeks to create synergetic, co-agency relations between students and faculty by empowering both to have a dialogical relationship that results in a critical transitivity (Freire, 1973). For Freire (1973), moving from naïve to critical transitivity - and, thus, from "banking" to a more "liberatory" form of education - can be done through an active, dialogical, critical and criticism-stimulating method. This requires a shift from traditional teaching methods that isolate and simplify particular aspects of reality to new "methods" that involve students in dialogue and co-investigation with teachers (Frankenstein, 1992).

However, we should be careful not to simplify the political dynamics of power/knowledge relations in schools and universities. Faculty are not totally autonomous and they alone should not be blamed for banking education and exercising power over students, nor should it be expected that they can easily change power/knowledge relations by, for example, encouraging students to participate in a dialogue. As Kreisberg (1992) states, "although [faculty] are central figures of authority and control in the classroom, in the larger hierarchy of educational bureaucracy they are remarkably isolated and often strikingly powerless" (p.9). Thus, we need to interpret student-faculty relations in a larger context of power relations, as a part of a complex web of power relations exercised in the educational institution and the society as a whole.

Efforts to change the stratification and framing of knowledge may encounter powerful resistance from those who hold positions of power. According to Young (1998), "moves to 'destratify' or give equal value to different kinds of knowledge, or 'restratify' (or legitimize other criteria of evaluation), by posing a threat to the existing power structure, are likely to be resisted" (p.16). Esland (1971) argues, for instance, that the problems of change and resistance to change are closely related to the social distribution of knowledge, particularly with the social distribution of expertness and its control

through professional mandate, and the rules and control of communication by "accredited reality" definers. So as long as knowledge is understood as given, valued and devalued, and distributed unequally among different groups, any attempt to change the status quo of knowledge structure will be resisted. However, the existence of power relations, according to Foucault (1978), depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance. So while knowledge is an instrument of power, it is also a point of resistance. This means that hegemony and power relations are not always left without resistance. Instead, there is always counterhegemony (Gramsci, cited in Wiener, 1994).

Methodology

Methodologically, the study involved ethnographic research that was conducted by Hamood Al-Harathi at SQU during a two and half month period (January 26-April 10, 2002) and focused on students and faculty in the College of Education. Data collection involved thirty-five class visits, observations in computer labs and professors' offices, interviews with thirteen professors, three individual students, and four focus groups of students (each group comprising 3-4 students), having informal conversations with professors and students, and distributing and collecting open-ended questionnaires from forty students. The sample included third-year Mathematics Education students and third-year² Social Studies students and faculty members who taught these two groups during the fieldwork period. There were forty-four third-year Mathematic Education students and twenty-nine Social Studies Education students. The student sample thus potentially provided a relevant contrast between students studying and planning to teach a subject such as Mathematics, which may be considered a relatively absolute and fixed form of knowledge, and students studying and planning to teach a subject such as Social Studies, which may be considered a more relativist and debatable form of knowledge.

Data were analyzed using inductive and deductive analysis approaches developed from the following sources: Glaser & Strauss (1967), Spradley (1979), and LeCompte and Preissle (1993). Material from observation field notes and transcripts of interviews and the open-ended questionnaires were sorted first into domains defined the above-noted three research questions. Then excerpts from the material were then further sorted into sub-domains of meaning (e.g., professors as the main source of knowledge, professors controlling the definition of relevant knowledge through exams and other forms of evaluation, reasons for drawing on the Internet for class assignments) based on a careful review of the field notes and transcriptions. Then similarities and differences across individuals and settings were elaborated and thematic conclusions were drawn.

Findings

The main findings indicate that the existence of the Internet and even its use by professors and students in SQU have not changed the structure of student-faculty relations, primarily because the Internet is perceived generally as just another, less-valued source of knowledge. The issue is not simply whether students have access to the Internet and use it, but how such use is organized and evaluated in the context of student-faculty power/knowledge relations. The conditions that could make the Internet a major contributor to changing traditional student-faculty power/knowledge relations were not seen in the fieldwork for this study. Two of these conditions are that

(a) the Internet should be less about content and information and more about relation to content and information and (b) the Internet should be a model for all people, including students and faculty, to create and disseminate knowledge. Consequently, despite the fact that more than 90 percent of the students and faculty indicated they used the Internet, this use was limited to receiving knowledge (often pre-defined by faculty) rather than to creating and disseminating knowledge.

In addition, for the most part the Internet simply shifts the place of exercising power/knowledge relations toward the web rather than changing the relations themselves toward enhancing the power/knowledge of students. For instance, the majority of students indicated that they only used the Internet for their courses because professors required them to do so. In fact, most students and professors complained about the Internet's lack of credibility as a source of knowledge and, accordingly, it was merely used as a supplementary text for the professor-assigned readings. Instead of the Internet actually changing power/knowledge relations, these relations seemed to colonize the way students and faculty used the Internet and, thus, reduced any impact it might have as an independent source of knowledge. This was clear in the evaluation of knowledge, selection of knowledge, and regulation of students, processes that directly and indirectly, contributed to reducing the importance of the Internet as a source of knowledge and to maintaining traditional student-faculty power/knowledge relations.

For example, despite the fact that about half of the students who responded to the questionnaire ranked professors as second or third in terms of their importance as sources of knowledge - below students, library, and the Internet - and that the required textbooks were seen as old and in need of up-dating, almost all students relied on professors and the textbooks they assigned as the main source of knowledge for the coursework. This is the case despite the availability and use of other sources of knowledge, such as the library and the Internet. The primary reason for such use was because examinations were based on the content of the textbook and because the professor decided which content would be included on exams. Therefore, since students viewed "valuable" sources of knowledge as those that were relevant to passing examinations, they tended to discount themselves, the library, and the Internet as sources of knowledge in relation to courses (except for research papers, for which the library and the Internet constituted more important sources of knowledge).

Most, if not all, students and many professors saw passing examinations with a high grade as the ultimate aim of attending courses and, indeed, of university attendance. Because of this perception, students focused on the means to satisfy professors' requirements to pass exams and avoided behaviors that would not satisfy them. Most students understood that the main requirement to pass exams was to memorize materials from the textbook and the professor's lectures. Emphasizing memorization as opposed to other forms of processing knowledge (e.g., analysis and problem-solving) contributed significantly to professors' control of knowledge and students.

Similar to the case for memorization of the subject matter, the focus on lecturing or the "banking education" model made students passive recipients of knowledge they received from the textbooks and professors' lectures. The "banking education" model was the main, if not the only, model of teaching methods in most of the courses

observed. Professors selected certain knowledge to transmit through lecturing, which worked to control both knowledge and students by giving professors the space to exercise their power/knowledge over students by delivering what they (or the higher authorities) thought was appropriate for students.

Nevertheless, in spite of the above-summarized perceptions of faculty and student roles and of the uses of the Internet, professors' control of knowledge and students were not completely unchallenged. At least some students showed different types of resistance to this control. For example:

- * A small number of students consulted Internet sources when they did not understand or were not convinced by what the professor or the textbook said.

- * Occasionally, in class sessions students expressed public disagreement with what the professor said what appeared in an assigned reading.

- * Half of the students indicated in the questionnaire that they felt they were more knowledgeable than a particular professor in some aspect of the curriculum.

- * More than half the students considered the professor to be second or third in importance as a source of knowledge, after the Internet and the library.

- * Most students complained about professors' teaching methods, which were dominated by lecturing and projected that they would much more interactive and (even) dialogical methods when they became school teachers.

Conclusion

Despite increased access to the Internet by both students and professors at SQU, the banking form of education still dominates. Observations and interviews detected very, very few instances of an emphasis on differentiated, but not stratified knowledge (Young, 1998), power-with relations (Kreisberg, 1992), collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1993), educative research (Gitlin et al., 1992), or critical transivity (Freire, 1973). For the most part professors and students at SQU continue to perform as capable (and culpable) participants in transactions through which professor-selected knowledge is deposited - in varying amounts - into students' heads. One might say that the Internet has merely introduced the opportunity for some limited forms of electronic banking education to take place.

It is important to note that some faculty members, particularly some of those who have more recently received their doctorates in England and the United States, seem open to alternative forms of faculty-student power/knowledge relations and that some students complain about (and fewer students openly resist) existing curricular and pedagogical arrangements. This suggests that the continuation of traditional faculty-student power/knowledge relations is not simply a matter of individuals' free choice, but instead reflect the existence of what Foucault (1979) calls a "regime of truth." The discourses circulating within the particular regime of truth at SQU are at times formalized, for example, in policy. At other times the discourses circulate more informally, though not necessarily with less resonance.

For instance, SQU policy states that professors - at the individual and collective (i.e., department or faculty/school) levels are responsible for defining the curriculum and selecting instructional materials (e.g., textbooks) to be used in various courses. Neither

government nor university policy directly requires professors to adopt textbooks that have been negatively evaluated by faculty and students as "old" or "irrelevant." However, students are given the ("old" and "irrelevant") textbooks and told that these (along with professors' lectures) will be the main source of content for the course, i.e., what will be evaluated via examinations³. Only a few professors - mostly as individuals - have raised the issue of changing the process of determining the curriculum and selecting instructional materials for courses, or have developed a private, individual strategy of using other handouts and encouraging students to go to the library. On the other side, students are generally complicit in this system, although at times begrudgingly, and rarely consult the Internet (or library books) as an alternative to textbooks, except when they need clarification on a topic addressed in required texts and professors' lectures.

Another example involves the pedagogical dimension. Again, while university policy requires that professors devote a certain number of hours to classroom contact with students, no government or university policy requires professors to employ lecture as their dominant and, in many cases, their only pedagogical strategy. Instead, an informal discourse that circulates as a part of the "regime of truth" at SQU (and many other institutions of higher education) makes lecturing the "obvious" choice, in part because it enables them to have a strong control over the knowledge transmitted in classes, while at the same time making it easier to control students. An informal discourse at SQU (and elsewhere) also encourages students to celebrate lectures, at least when they effectively communicate the content knowledge that they "need" to know for successful performance on exams.

The final example relates to a dimension that has already been mentioned, student evaluation. As with the curricular and pedagogical dimensions, SQU policy states that professors - at individual and collective (i.e., department or college/school levels) are responsible for evaluating students' academic achievement. However, neither university nor government policies require that written examinations be the only possible form of evaluation. Nevertheless, most, if not all, faculty members rely heavily on examinations, which cover material from their lectures and the textbooks they assign, as their main form of evaluating students. In the relatively few cases in which other forms of student evaluations, including research papers and presentations, laboratory exercises, etc., are employed, professors still retain control of selecting and evaluating knowledge, with the Internet considered of little value, if tolerated as a knowledge source at all. This (over)emphasis on examinations, of course, encourages students to focus on mastering only or primarily faculty selected knowledge - something that many students view positively, if only because preparing to take such exams requires studying only a finite, pre-determined body of knowledge.

This analysis of curriculum, pedagogy, and student evaluation at SQU has more than technical implications. Power/knowledge relations may or may not change, depending on whether those who are currently in more powerful positions recognize the need for change and come to see alternatives to the current "regime of truth." But such changes are unlikely unless these powerful agents either see advantages from such changes for themselves or come to view non-change as too destabilizing; if, for example, less powerful individuals (both faculty and students) organized, mobilized, and demanded

changes in such a way to make the university "ungovernable." The findings of this study are important for policy makers and practitioners, not just those at SQU but also those working in other governmental and non-governmental agencies in Oman and in countries where socio-economic arrangements are similar to Oman's. The overwhelming practice of power/knowledge relations and the "banking education" in SQU is not helping students in SQU or people in Oman to deal with the new local and global challenges and opportunities, particularly those related to globalization. Dealing effectively with these challenges and opportunities seems to require an education that goes beyond a focus on receiving and memorizing information defined as important by others. If university graduates and other people in the country tend to either accept or reject totally information, perspectives, etc. without thinking carefully about alternatives, let alone considering themselves as producers of new/refined ideas, they are likely to fit in with (or perhaps fall prey to) the ideas of one of two extreme groups. On the one side, there is the group of Westernists who accept and try to imitate all aspects of Western cultures and reject local ones. On the other side, there is a group who reacts against the "aggression" of and rejects all aspects of Western cultures, instead giving primacy to local cultures, particularly in terms of religious fundamentalism. While the issues around which these groups - as well as moderates, who seek to combine elements of Western and local Omani cultures - are very complex, mentioning them in relation to faculty-student knowledge/power relations reminds us of the broader context in which "regimes of truth" operate.

Notes

1. Despite the fact that the Qur'an encourages readers to think and explore themselves and their universe, to create new ideas and inventions, and to not merely imitate inherited thoughts and actions, teaching the Qur'an has mainly emphasized memorization of passages.
2. We initially planned to focus on fourth-year (senior year) Mathematics Education and Social Studies Education groups to observe their teaching practice in schools, which students do in their senior year. However, the Social Studies program was suspended temporarily in 1998 and then restarted in 1999. Therefore, at the time of the fieldwork there were no fourth-year Social Studies students. We dropped the plan to observe teaching practices in school and focused on third-year students as they had more experience in taking courses at SQU than first or second year students.
3. Government and university finance policies do have an indirect bearing on textbooks being emphasized, in that there is a line item for purchasing textbooks that are to be distributed to students free of charge. It seems that buying computers (instead of textbooks), thus expanding Internet, would not violate any formal policies, but seems to be an "unthinkable" option given an informal discourse contained within the "regime of truth" at SQU.

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