Constructing instructor-student and student-student authority relationships in technical writing classrooms

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Constructing instructor-student and student-student authority relationships in technical writing classrooms

by

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Abstract

The technical communication classroom creates a complicated dynamic of authority and knowledge. The academic institution grants authority to the instructor, who typically comes from English Studies, while the students come from scientific and technical fields and often have greater expertise than instructors concerning the content of the technical communication created in class. Despite this complicated relationship of authority, little research in technical communication addresses classroom authority relationships. The related field of composition studies provides considerably more discussion of classroom authority; however, this research is often predicated on two assumptions: (1) authority in the classroom rests solely with the instructor, and (2) such authority is inherently negative, particularly for students.

This dissertation begins to address that lack through examination of two classroom-based authority relationships: instructor-student and student-student authority. Based on classroom observations and drawing on the work of post-structural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Michel de Certeau, I argue that classroom authority is best understood as a series of negotiated relationships between instructor and students and among students. Although influenced by external structures such as institutional status, professional expertise, and gender, authority relationships manifest locally based on the interactions of individual instructors and students.

Two discursive structures, in particular, shaped instructor-student authority relationships in the study. First, the institutional practices of the university placed the instructor in a hierarchical position of authority over the students, a structure which the instructors and students I observed could complicate but never escape. While students and instructors did sometimes experience this traditional authority structure as a constraint, both groups also benefited in specific ways. Authority relationships in the two classrooms were further complicated by the different types of expertise claimed by those in the class. As students advance further in their own fields of study, they bring increased discipline-specific knowledge and expertise to the classroom relationship. When students in the study had disciplinary expertise that the instructor did not, they were able to assert authority in ways not encouraged by institutional structure. These different forms of expertise, combined with
other forms of cultural power (e.g., gender), created a complex web that both instructor and students negotiated when developing authority relationships.

Student-student authority relationships, meanwhile, have received little scholarly attention despite increasing pedagogical interest in assigning students to collaborative projects. Students face at least two powerful structural challenges when they attempt to assert authority with one another: (1) an educational system that focuses on individual academic success, and (2) an institutional structure that encourages students to engage in non-hierarchical, socially-based relationships with one another. Both structures complicate the negotiation of required group work for students.

Despite the challenges they faced, students did find ways to assert authority and work together, however. In my study, the structure of expertise played an important role in providing students with resources to frame their authority assertions. In addition, the students called on models for interaction that imitated other types of authority relationships, such as the instructor-student relationship or the socially-based student relationship in order to accomplish their work.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Six years ago, I was a 22-year old Master’s student in literature, teaching my first two sections of composition. I’d never taught before, and I worried a lot about what to teach, how much homework to assign, and how to respond to student writing. But mostly I worried about whether students would respect my authority. Would they accept me as their instructor? Would they do what I told them to do, even though I had been on the other side of the desk myself just four months before? Almost all the decisions I made during that first semester were tied to this idea of asserting my authority to the students—how to dress, when to smile, when to grant exceptions to my course policies, how to justify the grades I gave on their papers.

And I wasn’t the only graduate student in my program worried about the issue of authority. In the three-credit course on composition theory and practice that new TAs were required to take, a popular and recurring topic of conversation was how to get students to acknowledge the authority of an instructor who was young and/or female and/or casual, and so on. The TAs debated the most appropriate roles to take in relation to the students, ranging from “I just try to approach them as a friend” to “I don’t smile during the first three weeks. It’s always easier to loosen the reins than tighten them.” While we debated these issues, the instructors of the TA course asked us to consider articles on creating a learner-centered classroom and granting students authority over their own writing and the running of the course. But the articles did not connect to the experiences I was having as a TA. The articles assumed a level of instructor authority that I did not believe I had. My students seemed to have plenty of control already. They frequently (or so it seemed to me) resisted the activities I had planned and proposed alternatives (canceling class and debating campus issues were popular proposals). I found myself justifying the activities I had chosen in anticipation of student resistance.

After three years of teaching composition, I had become more comfortable in the classroom and had greater confidence that students would grant me initial authority as instructor of the course. At that point, I began teaching upper division professional communication classes, and I wanted the students to stop looking to me for answers to address communication situations. I wanted them, instead, to draw on concepts they had
learned and confidently approach each communication situation with a critical eye for the best approach rather than relying on formulae. Now I encountered resistance of a different kind. Students pressed me for greater detail on my expectations for what they should include in their assignments, how they should set them up, and so on. I became wary of offering suggestions or sharing models in class because students seemed to emulate exactly what I offered. Now the problem didn’t seem to be getting the students to accept my authority, but getting them to assume some authority of their own. Some days it seemed I couldn’t give away my authority if I tried.

Drawing from personal interest in classroom authority that developed through such experiences, I have created a study that addresses three needs I have identified in the fields of writing instruction, in general, and professional communication, in particular:

(1) to better articulate the influences, patterns, and possibilities of classroom authority
(2) to consider student-student authority relationships in the context of the classroom
(3) to extend conversations of classroom authority to the field of professional communication.

First, I believe there is a need for research that makes studying the manifestations of classroom authority relationships its primary focus. Composition provides a significant body of literature on the issue of classroom authority relationships. But while a number of critical and feminist composition theorists posit a complicated view of authority—according some attention to the roles that both students and structures such as gender and race play in instructor-student classroom authority (e.g., Miller, “The Sad Woman...”; Wallace and Ewald; Brooke)—other authors continue to write about authority and power in ways that seem overly-simplistic in their focus on the instructor’s status as the sole determiner of classroom authority (I will discuss a number of such articles in Chapter 2). I believe that one reason for the wide range of depictions of authority is that many scholars erroneously assume there are commonly shared and experienced understandings of “authority” and “power.” With some exceptions (e.g., Wallace and Ewald, Brooke), many recent composition scholars have not undertaken in-depth study of the nature of classroom authority, but have instead relied on assumptions about such authority to suggest how instructors can better meet the
needs of students. In this dissertation, I propose to address this need for research that closely examines how authority relationships are manifested in writing classrooms.

Second, as I examine classroom authority, I include in my inquiry student-student authority relationships. To date, even among those scholars whose articles reflect a complex understanding of authority, few have focused on the ways students assert classroom-based authority in relation to one another. Such inquiry is increasingly important as the fields of composition and professional communication continue to encourage students to engage in collaboration and co-authoring in the classroom.

Finally, my research extends the consideration of classroom authority to the field of professional communication. Although research and writing on classroom authority in composition studies varies widely in its usefulness, it is, still, an important thread throughout literature in that field. On the other hand, despite a substantial body of research on workplace authority relationships, research in professional communication has devoted little attention to classroom authority relationships (Aviva Freedman, et al. and Deanna Dannels are notable exceptions). To be sure, this need is filled to some degree by composition scholarship due to several important similarities between composition and professional writing classrooms. In writing classes at all levels, for example, authority relationships might be impacted in the following ways:

- Most composition and professional communication classrooms long ago rejected modernist views of objectivity in grading, reflected by performance on "tests" with a single right answer. Instead, instructors most often grade students on writing performance, an approach that students might perceive as more "subjective" than grading in other types of courses, which could, in turn, emphasize the instructor's institutional status as grader.

- In writing classes at all levels, the course content is largely invisible, which means students may not easily be able to "see" the source of the instructor's expertise.

- Students from across the university are required to take writing classes but may be encouraged by the epistemologies of their own disciplines to undervalue the types of knowledge the writing classroom focuses on, which could, in turn, influence the students' perception of the writing instructor's authority.

Despite these similarities, I believe key differences between composition and advanced professional communication courses raise issues concerning classroom authority that are distinct from one another. Composition courses are
primarily taught at the freshman level to students who have either not yet declared a major or who have had only an introduction to study in their major. Composition students are often new to college education and so may be used to the types of instructor-student and student-student authority relationships found in high schools. In addition, the writing that most students do in composition classes involves either generalist topics that students (and instructors) from a wide range of majors can easily become familiar with or introductory topics from students' majors. In professional communication classes, however, students come from advanced study in a wide range of science and technical fields and, as a result, have begun to develop extensive content expertise in their particular scientific or technical field prior to entering the professional communication course. The primary expertise of the instructor, on the other hand, is in writing-related areas, and the instructor often does not have expertise in science or engineering. Unlike topics that instructors and students read and write about in composition, the writing content in professional communication courses often comes from students' majors, topics that they likely know much better than the instructor or their classmates. For this reason, professional communication cannot rely solely on composition to provide a framework for understanding authority relationships in technical and business writing classrooms.

To address the three needs I have identified, I first articulated a conception of authority relationships that can be applied to professional communication classes by drawing together writings by post-structuralist theorists Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Michel de Certeau along with the work of a number of composition scholars (discussed in Chapter 2). I then applied this definition to two technical communication classrooms over the course of a semester to consider the ways authority manifested itself in actual classroom settings. Based on observations, interviews, surveys, and text analysis, I identified patterns of behavior and influence that resulted in further revision to my theory of classroom authority relationships. This dissertation is a result of that study.

**A Brief Definition of Authority**

Chapter 2 contains an extensive review of those post-structural and composition theorists whose work contributed to my understanding of authority. Here, I give only a brief summary of that definition to frame the rest of the dissertation. I define "authority" as
individuals' intentional and/or perceived role as directors of their own and/or others’ behavior. I focus here on the “direction of action” because manifestation of authority occurs in the interactions between individuals, resulting in what I call “relationships of authority.” As I described at the beginning of this chapter, for example, some students in my professional communication class perceived me as a director of their actions as they wrote their papers. These students knew that I would be evaluating the texts they wrote, which influenced their decisions about what to write and how to behave in class (asking for more direction). Whether or not I intended students to consider my preferences when deciding what to write, perceptions led some of them to do so, and this interaction between the students and me became a part of our relationship of authority to one another.

So authority occurs in the context of relationships between individuals or groups, but while authority relationships manifest individually, they are shaped by a wide range of discursive structures. Briefly, discursive structures are cultural-historical formations underlying a particular discipline or society that focus and constrain the direction that discipline or society can take. These structures develop through language: a discipline is “constituted by all that [has been] said in the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 32). Examples of discursive structures that may influence classroom authority relationships, specifically, include institutional status, professional and academic expertise, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. To return to the previous example, students who asked me for more guidelines on their writing were reacting to familiar educational structures and practices that give the instructor power over students through the act of grading, and the influence of that structure of institutional status then shaped the specific authority relationships of that classroom.

1 Initially, I intended to define “authority” in terms of an individual’s role as a competent, credible director of behavior; however, in the course of my study, several participants identified moments when individuals—both instructor and students—asserted authority over another’s behavior in ways that the participant did not find competent or credible. Despite this perceived lack of competence and credibility, participants sometimes felt unable or unwilling to resist that authority.

2 I refer to “relationships of authority”; however, the literature I draw from in this chapter and throughout this dissertation uses a range of terms, including “authority,” “power,” “ethos,” and “expertise.”
Discursive structures like the ones influencing my students are always already present outside of the individual situation or agent (Foucault, "What...? 110), shaping the range of (re)actions that may occur, and these structures constrain and enable the individual authority relationships that form (Giddens 25). They do not, however, result in a predetermined outcome. Instead, structures function as “resources” from which individuals construct relations of authority to one another (15). Individuals (re)enact authority in relation to one another through authoritative moves that draw on and/or resist the structures surrounding them (Foucault, *Archaeology* 46). In the classroom, therefore, instructors and students create relationships based on actions they take or choose not to take within the constraints of already present discursive structures. For example, if an instructor decides not to give reading quizzes and instead asks the students to determine what information in the textbook is useful and should be part of the course midterm, these pedagogical choices resist (by giving students control over the management of course material) and draw on (by preserving the instructor’s role as course designer) common institutional structures and practices. These choices will then influence the instructor-student authority relationships that form.

Since authority occurs within the context of a relationship between individuals or groups, the choices of one individual/group are influenced not only by external discursive structures, but also by the choices and reactions of others. In the classroom, although institutional practices place students in an authoritatively subordinate role in relation to the instructor, students have some options to accept or reject the authority moves of the instructor. Institutional structure may support an instructor’s authority to assign an in-class activity, for example, but if students choose not to participate in that activity (practicing overt or subtle resistance), then the instructor’s subsequent actions (amending the activity, providing an alternative, enacting consequences for lack of participation, etc.) are shaped by the students’ resistance, and the instructor-student authority relationship is altered as a result.

Most individuals occupy multiple subject positions in relation to discursive structures of power (e.g., I am institutionally positioned as the instructor, but I am female). As a result, individuals find themselves at the intersection of several discursive structures that may complement or contradict one another. The task of individuals engaged with one another then becomes to negotiate the available discursive structures. This overlap of discursive
structures accounts, in part, for the distinctiveness of individual authority relationships. The unique mixture of individuals in any given classroom means that the common discursive structures that may underlie most classrooms result in differently manifested authority relationships.

Ultimately, however, instructor-student and student-student authority relationships are heavily shaped by the interplay of several common discursive structures underlying the classroom: institutional status, professional and academic expertise, gender, race, sexuality, etc. By beginning research of classroom authority relationships with study of two specific classrooms, I can identify patterns that emerge, while continuing to acknowledge the complex web of discursive structures that impact a given classroom. My goal, then, is not to detail absolutely those structures at work in a classroom and their effects but, instead, to begin building a framework for conceiving of classroom authority relationships.

I believe such research will ultimately result in a deeper understanding of the nature of classroom authority and will benefit instructors and students as they continue to—consciously and unconsciously—engage one another in relationships of authority. Identifying common influences and patterns of authority relationships makes it possible to recognize more fully those structures impacting classrooms and how individual choices resist and support traditional expectations for authority. In turn, this knowledge may allow instructors and students to make informed choices as they assert authority in relation to one another in their classrooms.

**THE SECTIONS OF THIS DISSERTATION**

In my dissertation, I describe the manifestation of instructor-student and student-student authority relationships in technical communication courses where the students come from advanced study in science and technical fields, while the instructor comes from a background in English Studies. Chapter 2 reviews some relevant literature on authority from the fields of composition and post-structuralism. Although other fields such as education and cultural studies provide interesting discussions of authority, research from composition and post-structuralism most closely meet the needs of this study. The post-structuralists I look to—Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Michel de Certeau— theorize the nature of authority itself, an approach I identified as important earlier in this chapter. I then look to composition research as the most closely linked to professional communication for the reasons I identified on page 3.
demonstrate how despite the important composition research being done on authority, the work of some scholars is hampered by a construction of authority that does not fit the complicated context of most American higher education classrooms. In the second part of the chapter, I identify four often-overlooked components of authority that I find important: (1) authority is discursively structured and locally manifested; (2) authority is negotiated between individuals; (3) authority relationships are shaped by multiple, sometimes contradictory, discursive structures; and (4) authority relationships have positive as well as negative effects for the individuals involved. In discussing these four components of authority, I draw heavily on the research of post-structural theorists Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Michel de Certeau and on the work of those composition scholars whose work acknowledges the complexity of classroom authority relationships.

Chapter 3 describes my study and discusses methodological decisions I made during my research. In this chapter, I discuss my choice to research two classrooms throughout a semester as well as the methods I used to gather and analyze data. An important component of this study that I discuss in some detail was my decision to engage in a form of feminist ethnography in which participants played a role in shaping the direction of the research and also had the opportunity to respond to my interpretations of their classrooms. Finally, Chapter 3 also describes my position in the study as researcher and the instructors and students who made up the subjects of my research.

Chapter 4 focuses on the authority relationships between the instructors and students in my study. In the classrooms I observed, I discovered that two discursive structures in particular played significant roles in constituting instructor-student authority relationships. First, not surprisingly, the institutional structure of the university, in particular the relative status of those in the class, placed the instructor in a hierarchical position of authority over the students, a structure which the instructors and students could complicate but never completely escape. However, I found that while students and instructors were sometimes constrained by this traditional authority structure, both groups also benefited from it in specific ways. In addition, both instructors and students participated in (re)enacting and resisting the traditional authority relationships supported by institutional structure.
At the same time, authority relationships in the two classrooms were further complicated by the different types of expertise claimed by those in the class. Particularly as students advance further in their own fields of study, they bring increased discipline-specific knowledge and expertise to the classroom relationship. In the technical communication classroom, for example, while the majority of the students are on the brink of becoming professionals in engineering and science fields, the instructor’s primary expertise is likely to be communication-related. When the students in my study had disciplinary expertise that the instructor did not, they were able to assert authority in ways not found in a traditional institutional structure. Disparities in how various types of disciplinary expertise were valued by the instructor, the students, and the institution led to disruptions in traditional instructor-student authority relationships. These different forms of expertise, combined with other forms of cultural power, created a complex web in the technical communication classroom that both instructor and students negotiated when developing authority relationships. I end the chapter with a brief discussion of the role gender may have played in the development of instructor-student authority relationships in my study.

The majority of research on classroom authority has focused on the authority between instructors and students. In Chapter 5, I discuss the very important ways in which students asserted authority in relation to one another. I argue that the students in my study faced at least two powerful structural challenges in their attempts to assert authority in relation to one another. First, the students operated within an educational system that puts the focus on individual academic success, a structure that has potential to impact the ways students engage or opt not to engage one another. Second, the students were encouraged by institutional structures and practices to maintain non-hierarchical, socially-based relationships with one another throughout the campus setting. Both structures complicate the negotiation of required or elective group work for students.

Despite the challenges they faced, the students in my study did find ways to assert authority and work together. As with instructor-student authority, the structure of disciplinary expertise played an important role in providing students with resources to frame their authority assertions. In addition, the students employed models of interaction that
imitated other types of authority relationships, such as the instructor-student relationship or
the socially-based student relationship in order to accomplish their work.

Chapter 6 is a case study of one student’s authority relationships with her instructor
and with other students in the class. Throughout the semester, Jen showed a keen awareness
of the underlying structures influencing her decisions in the class, and these structures led her
to more actively negotiate her authority role in the classroom than most students did. Two
structures, in particular, influenced Jen’s choices during the semester. First, her sense of her
own expertise as an engineer and the relative value of that expertise as compared to that of
the instructor and students in other fields led her to assert authority over others. Second, and
sometimes contradictorily, her understanding of institutional status and the importance she
placed on being academically successful meant that Jen sometimes chose not to assert
authority in relation to the instructor. Based on that understanding, Jen also sometimes chose
not to devote her time to developing traditional, socially-based relationships with other
students in the class because she viewed such relationships as only of secondary importance
to her relationship with the instructor.

Chapter 7 summarizes my major findings and charts key patterns that emerged in the
instructor-student and student-student authority relationships of my study. I discuss several
implications of this study for teaching and research, including those areas that should be
researched further. As a whole, I intend this dissertation to present a preliminary framework
for articulating the complexity of authority relationships in writing classrooms.
Chapter 2: Using Available Research to Define the Nature of Authority Relationships

This chapter serves two purposes: (1) to contextualize my study in terms of previously published research on writing classroom authority and (2) to draw together several strands of research on authority to theorize a definition of authority relationships. First, I outline some of the current available research on writing classroom authority relationships. Little such research exists within professional communication, so I primarily look to composition studies for examples of published research. Second, because one of the criticisms I make in this chapter is that much available research has been under-theorized, I avoid this problem in my own study by fully articulating a description of the nature of authority. I devote the second half of this chapter to laying out this description, focusing particularly on a review of those theorists whose work contributes to my definition. As a result, this chapter is more than simply a review of existing literature; it also advances understanding of classroom authority in professional communication and composition studies by pulling together and synthesizing a broad range of ideas from post-structuralism and composition to create a four part description of authority.

Writing Classroom Research on Authority

This section briefly outlines some key research in professional communication and composition on classroom authority. The texts I discuss here provide some useful insight into writing classroom authority relationships, but I argue that they are limited in important ways. Professional communication research, for example, looks to the classroom almost exclusively for its ability to act as a workplace training ground, while the composition scholars included in this section operate from an under-theorized conception of authority. In addition, both strands of research focus exclusively on instructor-student authority without considering the roles students play in asserting authority in relation to one another.

4 In pursuing each of the purposes of this chapter, I will draw on the work of composition scholars. Although the first part of the chapter focuses primarily on limitations in much of the authority-based research in composition studies, my definition of authority relationships in the second part of the chapter draws on other composition scholars whose articulations of authority reflect more closely the theory I posit.
Research in Professional Communication

Concepts of authority and power are not new to the field of professional communication. The roles authority plays in workplace communication have been explored by a number of scholars (e.g., Paradis, et al.; Longo; Rosen; Mumby; Herrick; Hull; Henry; Fox), but little attention has been paid to classroom-based authority where instructors are frequently expected to professionalize students for workplace communication and its resultant authority relationships. And while classrooms may try to prepare students for the workplace, workplace authority differs from classroom authority because the relationships in each location differ, particularly in terms of the relative hierarchical status of instructors and students as opposed to those of supervisors and subordinates. When professional communication scholars do discuss classroom authority, these discussions are most often connected to examining how workplace simulations are hampered by students' awareness that the expectations of the classroom continue to be different from those of the workplace. Aviva Freedman, et al., for example, discuss the different genre expectations between a recommendation report made in a workplace and in a classroom setting. In discussing these generic conventions, the authors point to the instructor's institutionally-sanctioned authority (as represented by control over projects, grades, etc.) as a primary factor motivating students' decisions. They write that in the classroom, "how much detail to include, then, is not based on what readers need to know in order to make a decision or act but rather on what is necessary to demonstrate what the writer knows" (206). Similarly, Deanna Dannels demonstrates that even in client-based projects, students are primarily motivated by achieving high grades on a project and, therefore, view the professor as a more important audience than outside clients (23). Freedman, et al. and Dannels highlight important connections between the workplace and the classroom, but ultimately, their texts and others like them (e.g., Paradis, et al.; Longo) focus primarily on how class work prepares new employees for the organizational demands of the workplace. By themselves, the articles do not tell us about the distinctive nature of classroom authority relationships.

Research in Composition Studies

For research that does address classroom authority relationships explicitly, I turn to the related field of composition studies where a range of scholarship investigating the nature
of classroom authority has been published. Although composition's role as an introductory course orienting students to academic writing sets it apart from technical communication, which focuses primarily on initiating students into the communication of field-specific workplaces, three points of connection exist that make composition-based research relevant to technical communication. First, much of the research draws from education, which is relevant to higher education as a whole. Second, the focus on written communication raises authority issues common to both composition and technical communication classes related to instructors' grader function and students' work together as co-writers and peer reviewers. Last, both composition and technical communication typically pair an instructor with a background in one area of expertise (writing, linguistics, etc.) with students who hold expertise in other fields of study.

In the field of composition, discussions of classroom authority have primarily grown out of education scholarship and can often be traced back to the work of Paulo Freire. Based on adult literacy work in Latin America, Freire's best known text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, opposes the instructor-as-authority model because such structures lead to increased oppression of adult learners. Instead, Freire proposes "libertarian education," which begins "with the solution of the instructor-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (53). The Freirean model of education has crossed over to United States' higher education, where for over 30 years it has remained the basis for understanding how instructor-student authority operates, largely through a focus on what Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch have called "the asymmetrical power relations that situate participants in institutional cultures such as the academy" (557). Freire's critique of the "banking model" of education in particular has been influential in efforts to create alternative pedagogies in U.S. classrooms to address these asymmetrical power relations; however, uses of Freire's libertarian pedagogy have not always taken into account contextual differences between U.S. higher education and Freire's Latin American adult literacy work. Many of the students in college classrooms in the United States, for example, assert relative power and authority in aspects of their lives based on their class, race, etc., and for these students, a college education acts as a societally-provided stepping stone toward even greater power and authority. Therefore, when U.S.
composition scholars apply Freire’s arguments directly to U.S. classrooms and students, a sometimes over-simplified authority model is posited. In U.S. composition studies, the Freirean model has resulted in two basic assumptions about classroom authority: (1) authority in the classroom rests with the instructor and not with or among students, and (2) classroom authority is (only) a negative aspect of the instructor-student relationship. As a result of the pervasiveness of the Freirean model, most composition scholars writing about classroom authority either accept these assumptions unquestioningly or make refuting them the focus of the research.

The most common pedagogical scholarship stemming from the Freirean model focuses on the need to create “learner-centered classrooms” or “alternative pedagogies” where students can assert greater authority within the classroom. Taken as a group, these texts do an excellent job of charting the wide range of classroom structures impacted by institutional status, which in turn reinforces traditional instructor-student authority relationships. Composition articles have addressed instructors’ authority in relation to students in a range of areas, including grading (e.g., Lynn Bloom “Why I…;” Rothgery; Smith; Sommers; Straub), class discussion (e.g., Jarratt, “Feminism and Conflict…”; Lamb; Richard Miller), and computer technology use (e.g., Cooper and Selfe; Geiger and Rickard; Regan; Susan Warshauer).

A number of these texts portray learner-centered classrooms as sites where instructors minimize or relinquish their authority to the students. A common form of such authority relinquishing is to position the instructor as one of many writers/readers participating in the course rather than as simply evaluator or director of the course (e.g., Bishop; Lynn Bloom, “Why I…;” Samuelson). At the extreme end of those arguing for learner-centered classrooms are those scholars who argue that any level of instructor authority oppresses students. Janet Samuelson claims that “we need to start thinking of all students as victims of oppression when they have never been given the opportunity to write—freely and openly—without some restrictions being placed on them” (5). But most articles argue that instructors should lessen the imbalance between instructors’ and students’ authority without eliminating it altogether. Lynn Bloom, for example, describes a model in which the instructor participates as a fellow writer during the semester and allows students to play a role in
determining their grade in the course but reserves the final decision about writing success (in the form of a semester grade) for herself. Marshall Gregory suggests a pedagogy of befriending in which the instructor acts as a friend-guide to the students, a proposal that invokes the now-traditional feminized view of composition instructors as helpmeets and midwives (see Sam Dragga and Susan Miller for discussions of the feminization of composition instruction). Kevin Porter draws on Donald Davidson's theory of charity to argue for a classroom in which the instructor invests students with greater authority by granting their writing competency from the outset and working harder to understand student-author intentions. Barbara Geiger and Kristian Rickard claim that computer-mediated classrooms, particularly those employing a MOO, can increase student authority while minimizing the instructor's.

Scholars such as Gregory, Porter, and Geiger and Rickard describe authority as an object that can be passed to others through the appropriate methods. What such arguments often miss is that because instructors are institutionally-positioned as classroom authority figures, even efforts to establish "learner-centered classrooms" are still acts of authority— instructors define the activities of the class, they are responsible for grading and selecting assignments, etc. (Leanne Warshauer). Because these scholars do not consider the roots of the authority they resist, most do not consider the ways in which authority cannot be "reduced" or "given up" or how their proposed classrooms reinforce traditional modes of authority. For example, Geiger and Rickard claim that using a MOO in a composition class provides students with increased freedom and power, while simultaneously recommending that instructors carefully structure class time to insure work happens most efficiently.

Recognizing both the value of alternative pedagogical practices and their limits in altering instructor-student authority relationships, other researchers refute the view that instructor authority can simply be "given up." Lad Tobin writes that "Many writing teachers deny their role as co-authors and their tremendous authority in the classroom because it does not fit with the image they would like to project. Most of us are uncomfortable admitting that we are the center of a 'de-centered' classroom" (338). Tobin argues that instructors

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5 MOOs are a type of textual virtual reality system. Originally designed for online role-playing games, MOOs have been adapted to a variety of purposes, including distance education and computer-based writing courses.
should acknowledge their position in the classroom because in the eyes of students, instructors continue to be the authority. Similarly, although Leanne Warshauer argues for a more equal distribution of authority among instructor and students through extensive workshop-style collaboration, she acknowledges the problems with such an approach: “as a teacher, I have an undeniable, unrelinquishable authority in the classroom. Even in my workshop classroom, I’m still an authority because the very choice to have a workshop classroom is an authoritative choice” (91). Instead of denying her authority altogether, Warshauer argues for articulating the “authorities” in the classroom—the ways in which students hold authority in addition to (and sometimes at odds with) the instructor’s. Carole Deletiner also acknowledges the authoritative power inherent in the instructor’s role, but she argues that resistance to such power roles remains the job of the instructor because authority can only be undone by authorities (95). Based on this belief, she proposes teaching a course in which the instructor and students negotiate the curriculum to minimize the divisions of authority. Tobin, Leanne Warshauer, and Deletiner do not consider authority an object to be passed amongst a group of people, but instead as an inseparable, inherent part of an instructor’s status.

I have outlined here two popular strands occurring in composition research on authority: (1) the argument that instructors should give up their institutionally-sanctioned authority in the classroom to students in order to create a more egalitarian, student-centered classroom, and (2) the argument that instructors cannot give up their institutionally-sanctioned authority even though they may (and probably should) want to. Despite the different positions put forth by the articles, both strands share an assumption that authority rests with instructors based on the instructors’ institutional status. As a result, these texts present the view that students only access authority in the classroom when granted it by the instructor. In addition, the widely held view that instructor authority has (only) a negative impact on students results in articles that either assume this position or take great care to show why instructors’ authority can benefit students (e.g., Delpit). Clearly influenced by Freire (and almost always citing him directly), these scholars take a number of important issues for granted. While all assume a particular type of traditional instructor authority that should be resisted (at least in part), none considers where and how such authority is
constructed. In addition, although most of the texts I have discussed here focus on ways in which instructors can more effectively empower students, few consider students’ role in instructor-student authority construction and none examines how students assert authority in relation to one another. Rather, there is an assumption on the part of these scholars that the classroom will be whatever the instructor chooses to make it; conceptually and practically, therefore, authority remains firmly in the control of the instructor even in the learner-centered classroom. I do not deny the importance of the instructor’s status in determining authority relationships in the classroom. In Chapter 4, I will devote considerable discussion to the role institutional structure plays in the manifestation of authority between instructors and students. However, a view of authority as only determined by institutional status is limited in two ways. First, other external structures, such as expertise, gender, sexuality, age, and race impact how an instructor’s authority is manifested. Second, students’ role in the construction of instructor-student authority relationships and in their relationships to one another is ignored.

The composition scholars I have cited here make important claims about authority in writing classrooms. At the same time, however, the majority of their articles are based on incomplete assumptions of classroom authority as a tool or privilege primarily associated with instructors. Ultimately, their discussions are limited by an under-realized conception of “authority” and “power,” and as a result, present under-theorized interpretations of the ways in which authority functions in the classroom. To avoid similar problems in my own work, I devote the rest of this chapter to developing my theory of authority relationships. In doing so, I look to post-structural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Michel de Certeau, who theorize the underlying structure of authority. I also discuss a number of feminist and critical composition studies scholars whose understanding of classroom authority is more deeply theorized and complex than that of the composition scholars discussed above.

**Re-conceptualizing Authority**

As I stated in Chapter 1, I define authority as individuals’ intentional and/or perceived role as directors of their own and/or others’ behavior. Foucault describes a similar view of authority when he writes,
The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others. In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or in the future. ("The Subject..." 787-9)

Authority relations (or what Foucault calls "the exercise of power") occur within particular spaces, or "contexts" (Grossberg 55); in the case of my study, that context is the writing classroom. Below, I describe more fully my understanding of authority relationships through discussion of the four components of authority that are most important to my research, namely that (1) authority is discursively structured and locally manifested; (2) authority is negotiated; (3) authority is complicated by the multiple, contradictory structures influencing it; and (4) authority has both positive and negative effects.

**Authority is discursively structured and locally manifested**

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that authority occurs within the context of relationships between individuals and groups. Each set of authority relations is distinct but, at the same time, constrained by underlying structures influencing that relationship. To make this argument, I rely heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, who, in several of his books and articles, develops the concept of discursive structures and how such structures simultaneously shape and reflect a culture or discipline.

Discursive structures are those formations underlying a particular discipline or culture that focus and constrain the direction that discipline or culture can take. Discourse, in this sense, does not refer to articulations of pre-existing (or pre-lingual) ideas or objects, but to the creation of culture through language. Jim Henry defines discourse as "a way of thinking (and knowing and talking) about the world, inherently ideological and positioning language, not as a vehicle to describe a pre-existing reality but as the material out of which thought and reality are constructed" (92). Paolo Freire imagines a similar role for discourse, arguing that

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6 In this dissertation, I focus on the discursive (cultural-historical) structures and practices of a given community or society. An alternative conception of structures that might also be beneficial to study of classroom authority relationships are the mental structures (also known as stages or positions) proposed by cognitive theorists of human development. Theorists such as William Perry and Marcia Baxter-Magolda, for example, have studied the ways in which college students' intellectual and ethical behaviors are shaped by their cognitive development and gender (Evans et al.). An in-depth study of the ways cognitive development shapes classroom authority is beyond the scope of this dissertation but could prove a fruitful avenue for further study.
"human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (88). In the context of writing classroom pedagogy, specifically, David Wallace and Helen Ewald have argued that many people fail to recognize “the power of classroom language to both construct and reflect knowledge as well as social relations in the classroom” (2).

Discursive structures are more than simply discourse of the moment, spoken by individuals with the freedom to say anything, however. Past ways of speaking about a topic create power dynamics that constrain what can be said about a given culture or discipline at any one time. Discursive structures, then, are always already present outside of the individual situation or agent. As Lawrence Grossberg argues, “authority is not constructed from the identity of the actor but from the already invested worthiness of the site” (387). To understand Grossberg’s point, we can look to Foucault’s example of the author function to see the extent to which the structures leading to relationships of authority pre-exist the individuals who step into those roles. In “What is an Author?” Foucault explains that the author function exists prior to any individual author stepping into that role (110); thus, the structure of author does not rely on a particular individual to sustain its existence. Similarly, the hierarchical structures of instructor and student pre-exist the individuals who step into those roles in a given classroom, and the structures continue to exist even when one student or instructor replaces another. Within the educational system, these structural spaces might be represented through the division of time into classes and activities within classes (Discipline 149), the use of exercises, and the giving of exams (159), all of which classify and eliminate individuals and/or behaviors in relation to a particular structure of authority. Wallace and Ewald point out that resistance to traditional classroom authority relationships is further constrained by national focus on standardized tests and by higher education’s heavy reliance on “limited-term” instructors who may not have the resources or the job security to support alternative pedagogies (25).

Since the structure occupies space that pre-exists the individuals participating in that structure, individuals are distributed not into a fixed position but “a network of relations” (Discipline 146) that are “defined by the situation that it is possible for [individuals] to occupy in relation to the various domains or groups of objects” (Archaeology 52). In composition studies, Dennis Ryan presents a similar view of authority as “a relation, a locus”
These relational positions impact authority by determining the range of (re)actions that may occur (Archaeology 37). Because the structural spaces pre-exist the individuals who step into those spaces, the structure becomes an inescapable framework within which occur all relations of authority, including those manifestations of authority that resist the structure itself (Archaeology 46). Wallace and Ewald claim that instructors employing alternative pedagogies to alter authority relationships with students, at the same time continue to participate in and, to some degree, reproduce traditional instructor-student authority relationships (2). Individuals simultaneously (and often, unknowingly) resist and reinforce dominant authority structures because “the prescriptions involving the structuring of daily interaction are much more fixed and constraining than might appear from the ease with which they are ordinarily followed” (Giddens 23).

But discursive structures, while influential, remain abstract until individuals take action from the range of possibilities available in a particular context. Foucault argues that although the structure underlying a discourse constrains its possible manifestations, the discourse leaves free “a field of strategic possibilities” (Archaeology 36-7). Anthony Giddens has argued that while resources for action and knowledge are drawn from pre-existing power structures, those resources are used by “knowledgeable agents in the course of interaction” (15). As a result, authority relationships may be shaped by discursive structures, but they do not result in a predetermined, replicable outcome (Foucault, Discipline 27).

And just as choices that result in local manifestations of authority are influenced by underlying discursive structures, those choices in turn impact the structure itself, reinforcing or altering it (Foucault, Archaeology 73; Grossberg 56). Because structure is created through discourse, continued discursive acts then shape future directions for that structure (Giddens 19). Alteration is possible because discursive structures are not constant. They change according to location and time. Foucault illustrates this in “What is an Author?” when he describes how the author function has shifted throughout history—whereas fictional tales were once accepted on the basis of their age, now “literary” texts are defined by their author. Similarly, scientific texts were accepted as “true” in the Middle Ages when marked with the name of a credible author, such as Hippocrates or Pliny, but later scientific discourse adhered to the idea of anonymous, objective, replicable truth (109).
In summary, authority exists as a series of locally-manifested relationships among individuals. Authority relationships are impacted by external discursive structures that constrain the range of choices available to individuals as they seek to assert authority in relation to one another. The choices made by individuals and the resulting relationships of authority, then impact the discursive structures themselves. Because authority relationships are locally manifested, they retain always the possibility for alteration, which leads to the second feature of authority I wish to discuss: the negotiation of authority.

Authority is negotiated

Grossberg argues that a particular context can only be understood in retrospect because any context is predicated on the particular individuals and circumstances coming together (55), and in the previous section, I discussed how the unique blend of instructor and students in a given classroom lead to local manifestations of authority. A second important feature of classroom authority relationships is that they must be negotiated between instructors and students and among students. In instructor-student relationships, although instructors may set the early tone for a class based on their institutional status, students also play a role in the construction of authority relationships. As I discussed in the first part of this chapter, many scholars, including those in composition, have not recognized the negotiated nature of authority, instead equating instructors' institutional status with their authority in relation to students. In some measure, Foucault contributes to a view of individuals constrained and dis-empowered by the structures they inhabit. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that structures seek to create “docile bodies.” According to Foucault, “a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (*Discipline* 136).

But despite identifying complete control as a goal of structures, Foucault recognizes the degree to which power and authority are actually negotiable. He writes that

Power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions—an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. (*Discipline* 27)
In certain instances, the dominated may engage in sustained resistance to the structures created by those in power, necessitating the development of new structures. Foucault demonstrates this negotiation of power and authority by describing the change in penal punishment from public executions to more privately meted out punishments such as imprisonment. According to Foucault, this shift was precipitated, in large part, by the peasants' resistance to the prosecution's role as executioner and their moves to re-inscribe executions as sites for revolt against royal rule (Discipline 60-1). In later writings, Foucault moves even farther from the idea of power acting on individuals to claim that "a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable...: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts" ("The Subject..." 789).

Other scholars have also critiqued the idea that discursive structures result in "docile bodies," relatively powerless individuals who are completely constrained by external, societal structures. Anthony Giddens argues that even relatively powerless individuals are "agents" and that "no one is only acted upon" (16). In his view, structures exist only as the activities of individuals and society's collective memory of such activities, and for this reason, he argues that "all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors" (16). In the classroom, this means that while students may have less power and authority than their instructors, they are not powerless. Instead, students use the resources available to them to make choices that impact classroom authority relationships.

Similarly, Michel de Certeau argues that relatively powerless individuals do have agency to resist and alter the structures that constrain them. He argues that the dominated have "innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game...that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations" (18). He does this by describing the difference between what he calls "strategies" and "tactics." According to de Certeau, strategies are those actions taken by those in power to "produce, tabulate, and impose" particular structures. Tactics, on the other hand, are employed by those upon whom structures are imposed to "use, manipulate, and
divert" those structures (30). So even when students cannot reject or significantly alter the institutional structure that places them in a hierarchically subordinate position to their instructors, they are able to use that structure to their own ends in the context of a particular classroom to “find ways of using the constraining order” of the structure (xiii).

In professional communication and composition, the majority of articles on classroom authority do not account for students’ role in forming authority relationships, in large part because the authors focus exclusively on the ways the instructor’s authority constrains a class. But other authors acknowledge students’ role in determining classroom authority, by identifying ways students already do alter relations of power, consciously or unconsciously, with instructors in the classroom. Because authority construction is local and continuous, feedback from students—whether positive or negative—influences instructor behavior, which, in turn, may affect the balance of instructor-student authority in that classroom.

Michel de Certeau’s argument is similar, in many ways, to that of Mary Louise Pratt’s in “Arts of the Contact Zone.” Pratt argues that contact zones are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34), including colonized nations, slave states, and contemporary educational institutions. Pratt argues that “conquered subjects” of such social spaces can employ dominant resources to achieve ends that do not support the goals of the dominant group (36). Jennifer Meta Robinson argues that when students engage in such acts of institutional subversion by choosing not to accept an instructor’s authority or by working consciously or unconsciously to undermine it, they make local authority relationships distinct from institutionally sanctioned power (Robinson).

Similar to de Certeau’s discussion of “tactics,” Robert Brooke discusses students’ manipulations and diversions of classroom structure through what he calls “underlife”—behaviors that “undercut the traditional roles of the American educational system” (“Underlife…” 141). Underlife may be disruptive, where students actively try to change the direction of a course or particular activity, or it may be contained, where students work around expectations to meet personal goals and needs (143). Brooke identifies underlife as a tactic that both students and instructors can use, but these behaviors may be particularly
important to students, who cannot rely on institutional control over the classroom. These students might engage in a number of underlife (or tactical) behaviors, including

- altering classroom materials and activities
- engaging in conversations on how to “get by” in the class
- making evaluative comments about the usefulness of class activities to the class as a whole or to a small group
- engaging in activities other than what the teacher has asked students to do (144-148)

Brooke views all of these behaviors as positive signs of students’ efforts to complicate their position in the classroom by resisting the institutionally-defined student role.

But not all scholars who acknowledge the negotiated nature of authority claim that students’ role in authority construction must be subversive. Wallace and Ewald propose the concept of “mutuality,” which can be understood as “teachers and students sharing the potential to adopt a range of subject positions and to establish reciprocal discourse relations as they negotiate meaning in the classroom” (3 [italics mine]). Dennis Lynch and Stephen Jukuri theorize a classroom where students and instructors engage in “flexible and reversible ‘relations of power’” where course goals are “less likely to be predetermined for teachers and students and more likely to be matters for negotiation” (272). Citing Foucault, Lynch and Jukuri point out that power structures cannot be escaped (and instead result only in changes to the forms of power) but that “relations of power” can be negotiated differently (281).

While acknowledging the powerful position instructors inhabit in their classrooms, Dennis Ryan argues that actual authority is negotiated between individual instructors and students; to support this point, he cites a survey that asked students to identify major “turning points” in their relationships with instructors (4). Carole Deletiner suggests that instructors make the negotiation that occurs in the classroom explicit by asking students to participate in planning the second half of the semester and in evaluating/grading themselves and others (96-7).

An additional aspect of classroom authority negotiation that has been largely unexplored prior to this study involves recognition of the ways students negotiate authority among themselves. Student-student authority occurs in much less defined ways than instructor-student authority because as Giddens has argued, relatively powerless students must work within an already defined institutional structure, one that does not empower
relationships of authority among them. One article from composition studies that raises awareness of student-student authority is Brooke's article on underlife, discussed above. Although Brooke's article focuses primarily on students' relationships to their instructors, he does show students engaging one another as partners and foils in their manipulations and diversions of the institutional structure in the classroom.

For more in-depth discussions of the ways students negotiate authority in relation to one another in order to accomplish coursework, it is necessary to look outside college composition research to other fields. In engineering education, Cynthia Haller, et al. examine the roles students assume in relation to one another when asked to work in groups. These roles might be collaborative, with no hierarchical distinctions made between group members, or they may emulate the instructor-student relationship, with one student teaching another. Similarly, Helen Dale examines student-student authority among ninth-graders by identifying the behaviors and authority assertions that characterize effective or ineffective group writing strategies. Haller et al. and Dale do important work by considering how students actively negotiate authority within the classroom setting, but their work stands as an exception to the majority of education and composition research that considers instructor-student authority only. And in the field of professional communication in particular, research regarding student-student authority has been, until now, virtually non-existent.

The issue of authority negotiation played an important role throughout my study, and it is a crucial aspect of understanding instructor-student and student-student authority. Acknowledging the negotiated nature of student-student and instructor-student authority relationships does not ignore the important role discursive structures such as institutional status play in creating inequalities of authority and power. However, it remains important to recognize that actual manifestations of authority relationships do include a significant amount of negotiation, even when the results of negotiation ultimately reinforce a traditional authority relationship. Typically, negotiation of authority is more likely to occur when multiple and sometimes contradictory discursive structures impact the same relationship, a point I discuss in the next section.
Multiple, (sometimes) contradictory structures complicate authority

A third element of authority relationships important to my study is that such relationships occur as the result of the interplay of several different discursive structures. Grossberg makes this point while writing on the effects of power relations in cultural studies, when he claims

Concrete relations of power are always multiple and contradictory. Since people always live in a complex and changing network of social relations, they are implicated in contradictory ways in the hierarchical relations of power.... Hence politics is never limited to state or economic relations, never merely a question of the distinctions between classes or between politically empowered factions. Relations of gender, sexuality, race, class, differential abilities, age, nationality, ethnicity—all describe social differences that can be articulated into the organization of power in the contemporary world. Moreover, such differences rarely exist in isolation or in some clear-cut, decontextualized forms. (98)

The majority of the articles cited in the first section of this chapter focused exclusively on institutional status as the determiner of classroom authority. I agree that institutional status plays an important role in shaping instructor-student relationships; however, Grossberg's quote highlights the degree to which multiple power structures shape a particular context. And on a practical note, if institutional status were the only structure shaping classroom relationships there would be fewer distinctions between authority in individual classrooms.

Assuming classroom authority is distributed strictly according to classroom status misses the fact that discursive structures typically do not exist in isolation. Typically, individuals find themselves at the intersection of several discursive structures that may complement or contradict one another, a phenomenon Foucault refers to as “rupture” (Archaeology 4). He argues that it is important to consider how different structures impact one another: “The discursive practices modify the domains that they relate to one another. It is no use establishing specific relations that can be analysed only at their own level—the effect of these relations is not confined to discourse alone: it is also felt in the elements that they articulate upon one another” (Archaeology 75). Michel de Certeau makes a similar point when he discusses an individual’s multiple subject positions in relation to others: “analysis shows that a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse, and
that each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact” (xi).

One example of an alternative structure influencing technical communication classrooms in particular is disciplinary expertise. Technical communication is typically taught by instructors with a background in English Studies, while the students come from a range of science and technical fields. In technical communication classes, both content and writing skills come together to create effective communication, and while the instructor may hold expertise in writing, it is likely the students who have the best grasp of various types of technical content. As a result, the technical communication class is different from composition, which relies on an instructor's higher level of expertise in the subject area of writing (Sortirou).

A number of scholars have pointed to the important role that expertise can play in altering classroom authority relationships. Leanne Warshauer acknowledges the authority held by an instructor based on institutional status and writing-based knowledge, but argues that bringing students' own expertise and experiences into the classroom may alter the hierarchical nature of the instructor-student authority relationship (91). Wallace and Ewald refer to the concept of "interpretive agency," similar to expertise, which they define as "the ability to influence class tasks and topics as well as the ability to influence the choices that individual writers (including oneself) make. Interpretive agency involves bringing one’s prior experience to bear in the construction of knowledge" (16). In Wallace and Ewald's proposal, instructors would focus on the knowledge students generate from their own academic, professional, and personal expertise rather than asking students to master "discrete units of received knowledge" (17). And disciplinary expertise can also be a means for students to assert authority in relation to each other. Rolf Norgaard looks to technical communication classes, specifically, as sites where students can negotiate their different forms of expertise in order to create knowledge (51).

Other composition studies scholars have pointed to societal structures such as gender, age, race, sexuality, etc. that influence students’ perceptions of authority relationships with instructors (e.g., Susan Miller; Connors; Royster; Elliot; Robinson). Shirley Wilson Logan, for example, discusses the effects that the "triply complex convergence of race, gender, and
institutional authority" in composition classrooms has on instructor-student relationships (54). Similarly, Eileen Schell considers intersections of class, economic power, and institutional practice in her research with part-time composition instructors. These scholars highlight the dangers of assuming that instructor status alone determines classroom authority relationships.

In this dissertation, I look specifically at the crucial roles gendered structures and practices may play in technical communication and other general education writing courses, which are frequently taught by part-time instructors, many of whom are women. For this reason, I review here several articles examining intersections between gender and institutional status. Looking at gendered effects on classroom authority, several scholars argue that the learner-centered classroom is a different experience for male and female instructors. Research in composition and secondary education has found differences between the authority of male and female instructors, meaning that while a learner-centered approach may result in positively perceived authority construction for instructors whose institutional power is complemented by their position in relation to other societal structures, that same approach may be less effective for instructors with less external power (Kasik, Mowery, Robinson). Lil Brannon writes of the "double move" that male instructors can make:

In resisting the image of male critical teacher as all knowing, distant, imparter of knowledge, the male critical teacher, gives up, on the one hand, the power of the authoritarian, conservative male teacher, yet, on the other, paradoxically gains power by becoming the ‘star,’ the male hero in the educational narrative mythos (460).

Jane Hindman, Kari McBride, and Glen Barrett argue that women "cannot make this same double move, for they are not sacrificing power or resisting an image of themselves as omnipotent; a woman’s moves to relinquish her individuality and become invisible are not heroic, they are expected" (22), so female instructors in the learner-centered writing classroom are placed into the role of “mother” rather than expert. Dot Radius Kasik supports this view of the problems of the learner-centered classroom for female instructors; she reports that “for male students who find acceptance of female instructors difficult, dislocation

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7 As Susan Jarratt argues in the introduction to her edited collection *Feminism and Composition Studies*, I see gender as only "one point of entry" into the discursive structures shaping classroom authority relationships (13).
of the teacher’s authority is particularly problematic” (abstract). Examining the confluence of discursive structures, Jennifer Meta Robinson points out that female teaching assistants face decreased external authority not only because they are women but also due to their reduced role in the university and sometimes their young age.

The scholars above demonstrate just some of the ways multiple discursive structures act on a given authority relationship; these structures may directly or indirectly complement or contradict one another. The presence of multiple discursive structures often leads to increasingly complicated relationships of authority with increased opportunities for negotiation. Drawing from and building on the scholarship cited here, my study will consider how the structures of expertise and gender support or undermine the hierarchical relationships encouraged by the structure of institutional status in the technical communication classroom.

Authority has positive and negative effects

The final aspect of authority that will be important to my study is that authority has positive as well as negative effects for both instructors and students. It is perhaps easiest to see how institutionally-sanctioned authority benefits the instructors: a typical view of authority relationships holds that authority benefits those in power (instructors) while constraining the dominated (students). Such a characterization fits Freire’s depiction of the banking model of education. Foucault also presents a primarily negative view of authority, calling structures “calculated constraint” (Discipline 135) and claiming that the goal of a disciplining structure is to create docile bodies “that may be used, transformed, and improved” (136). Similarly, de Certeau depicts structures as those constraints placed on the relatively powerless by those with power. The powerless then react to this constraint by disrupting, manipulating, and resisting the structure (xiii).

While I agree that discursive structures play a significant role in constraining particular behaviors, I do not believe that this is the only role structures play, particularly in the type of classroom setting I observed. Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, from which our understanding of the banking method originates, is based upon his work with poor, adult learners in an oppressive political system. Similarly, de Certeau’s research often uses examples of indigenous or lower class groups oppressed by economically and politically
powerful colonizers. Such groups may likely experience the dominant available structures as almost solely constraining.

In the case of my research, however, the students operating within the structure of the institution are highly educated, usually white, middle class individuals who participate in the institution with the understanding that doing so will allow them to more quickly access economic and political authority and power of their own. For this reason, students as well as instructors may experience some benefits from structures that will ultimately enable them to achieve their own goals. Michel de Certeau speaks to this class distinction when he discusses the different responses available to immigrant workers and middle class citizens when confronted by media images (xvii). In composition studies, Dennis Lynch and Stephen Jukuri remind instructors that many students view the institution as an opportunity to access a more equitable share of authority and power for themselves (272). Similarly, Wallace and Ewald claim that effective alternative pedagogies cannot assume that all students will or should resist the dominant culture because such an assumption can constrain students by re-inscribing the idea that the instructor’s authority is absolute (21).

This is not to deny that the structures of the institution constrain students. Foucault argues that knowledge has been the privilege of those in power (Discipline 35), and in this way, educational institutions are concerned with maintaining particular knowledge systems, and thus particular systems of economic and political power (Allen and Thompson 178). However, a more complex view of the effects of discursive structures is needed to consider the ways in which the institution helps students achieve their own goals. Anthony Giddens provides such a view in his description of structuration, in which he argues that “power is the means of getting things done, very definitely enablement as well as constraint” (175). Many students, for example, may have been very successful in classroom situations where the instructor assumed traditional forms of authority; being asked to assert authority of their own can be time-consuming and risky for students. Janet Samuelson who argues that instructors can and should give their authority away to students, acknowledges that such changes may go against what students are used to—or even desire:

Because students are encouraged [in Samuelson’s model] to write to find meaning and to hunker up against discovery, they have tremendous responsibilities—more challenging and more important ones than if they were
simply to take notes, regurgitate them, second-guess the teacher on what she wants in a paper, and produce bland, generic representations... (8)

Students, therefore, may benefit from traditional relationships of authority through increased comfort in course expectations and greater efficiency of time in accomplishing course-related tasks. Even more importantly, students may believe that a classroom based on traditional relationships of authority and knowledge better prepares them for the positions of authority they hope to assume themselves. Lisa Delpit, for example, argues that African American students benefit most from being taught specific “technical skills” by an instructor willing to assert authority in the classroom; such approaches prepare these students to succeed in academic and professional settings (55).

Just as the dominated (in this case, students) are not only constrained by the structure of the institution, those with power (instructors) do not simply benefit from the structure but are constrained in their authority relationships as well. The institutional structure defining an instructor’s role limits possible manifestations of that role. Foucault discusses the constraint on those placed in privileged positions when discussing the author function. The rise of the author function, which grants individual writers a particular type of authority through their texts, also makes transgression through writing a riskier act (“What is an Author?” 109).

If we consider, then, the dual nature of authority—both constraining and enabling—we must look for the ways in which instructors and students embrace the structures impacting their relationships of authority as well as for the ways they resist those structures. Developing a deeper understanding of the possibly contradictory perceptions individuals might have concerning discursive structures may also help explain those instances where an individual’s assertions of authority simultaneously alter and reify traditional relationships.

**CONCLUSION**

Given the dearth of research related to authority relationships in the technical communication classroom, I have tried to accomplish two tasks in this literature review: (1) to map the field of classroom authority research in composition studies, and (2) to use some of the available literature from both composition scholars and post-structural theorists such as Foucault, Giddens, and de Certeau to create a description of the form and function of authority that will inform my own study.
While my own understanding of authority is significantly informed by the research I have discussed here, I believe that my study engages new territory in three ways. First, no one view of authority seems to fully recognize the four components that I believe are most crucial to understanding instructor-student and student-student authority:

- authority is discursively structured and locally manifested
- authority is negotiated
- multiple, (sometimes) contradictory structures impact authority
- authority has both positive and negative effects

Second, the majority of the authors I discuss here base their discussions of authority on abstract theory, history, or their own experience; few authors have attempted to identify patterns in actual, observed manifestations of authority relationships. And with the exception of Wallace and Ewald’s book on mutuality, no professional communication or composition scholars have undertaken an in-depth study of the nature of classroom authority, specifically. Like Wallace and Ewald, I approach this study of classroom authority relationships through examination of specific classrooms. I push this examination further, however, by deepening my study of the two classrooms to include each class period of a semester, which allows me to observe aspects of authority that unfold over time in the day-to-day. In addition, I move Wallace and Ewald’s consideration of authority relationships beyond composition and into the field of professional communication.

Last, my study not only considers the authority relationships that occur between instructors and students, which has been the subject of numerous texts, but also acknowledges the ways in which students assert authority in relation to one another. This area of classroom authority has not been taken up in either the fields of professional communication or composition and has received only scant attention in other fields. This focus on student-student authority represents an important broadening of the understanding of what classroom authority means.
Chapter 3: Study Methodology

As mentioned above, issues of authority occur in the interactions between instructors and students and, therefore, cannot be separated from their specific contexts. To observe the development of specific authority relationships over time, I took an ethnographic approach to my Fall 2002 study of two technical communication classrooms. My participants included two technical communication instructors, Frida and DW, and 45 students from their sections. Through a combination of interviews, observations, surveys, and text analysis, I determined patterns and features of the authority relationships in two classes. By creating a feminist ethnographic study, I was able to raise questions and develop theories about the nature of instructor-student and student-student relationships. While I do not argue that the incidents and patterns I observed are generalizable to all teaching in technical communication, I believe this study raises important questions about the nature of authority in classrooms and in interactions across disciplines. These questions are particularly important for the field of professional communication, which, before now, has afforded little attention to classroom authority.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the rationale behind my decision to take a feminist, ethnographic approach to my study. Then, I describe the study I conducted, including a description of the participants, the methods I used to gather and interpret data, and the roles participants played in framing and directing my research.

8 At the beginning of the study, I invited both instructors to select their own pseudonyms. The male instructor chose the pseudonym Deborah, in part because his parents would have named him Deborah had he been born a girl, so the name “Deborah” invokes for him “what might have been,” a sort of parallel (unlived) life. I appreciate the thoughtfulness that Deborah brought to this and all his decisions throughout the study. In the text of this dissertation, however, I explore the gendered aspects of instructor-student relationships, so to avoid confusion for the readers, Deborah and I have agreed that I will refer to him as DW in the text.

9 In research concerning in-depth study of a single setting, there is some disagreement over the differences between ethnographic and case study methodologies. In at least one instance, the idea that ethnography is a methodology at all has been disputed (Hemdl 321). I consider my research an ethnographic study because it occurred over a relatively long period of time (the duration of a semester course) and because it included a series of methods, including observation and interview, that are commonly associated with ethnography. The articles that I refer to in this chapter do not uniformly refer to “ethnography,” however; Kathryn Rentz and Shulamit Reinharz, for example, offer insights pertaining to “case studies” that are useful to what I am calling an ethnographic study.


**METHODODOLOGY RATIONALE**

In this section, I briefly articulate the rationale behind my study: first, my selection of an ethnographic approach and second, my commitment to feminist action research.

**Using Ethnography**

There is strong precedent for using ethnography to conduct literacy-based studies (including a number of studies that focus specifically on writing classrooms). In the last year, at least six articles published in the journal, *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* were based all or in part on case study or ethnographic research (Gonsalves, Kumamoto, Moreno, Pough, Sohn, Trainor). In addition, a number of workplace-based studies in the field of technical communication have used ethnographic and case study methods. By comparison, there are significantly fewer recent studies relying on quantitative methods (composition articles on correctness, most recently Nancy Mann's article on punctuation in *CCC*, are notable exceptions).

What accounts for the prevalence of ethnographic research in the fields of literacy studies and professional communication? In part, ethnography's popularity may be due to the types of data that can be elicited through qualitative methodologies. According to Miles and Huberman,

> Qualitative data are... a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations. Then, too, good qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and to new integrations; they help researchers to get beyond initial conceptions and to generate or revise conceptual frameworks. (1)

In the case of classroom pedagogy and workplace research that focuses on authority and power, researchers are often dealing with one or more unknown variables. This complexity leads to studies that are interested in raising questions or examining the way variables interact in local contexts. Similarly, Wendy Bishop adapts the work of earlier methodology scholars to come up with a list of characteristics for research in the ethnographic tradition.

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10 A number of these studies address issues of power and authority (e.g., Doheny-Farina, Hull, Herrick, Rosen), similar to what I have done in my own study.
Such a study, she claims:

- is phenomenological and seeks to understand human behavior from the participants' frame of reference
- systematically observes recurring patterns of behavior as people engage in regularly occurring activities
- uses field settings and develops hypotheses grounded in events and driven by the conceptual framework of the study
- confirms across a variety of information sources, contexts, times (4)

The work of ethnography makes it possible to explore the kind of open-ended, less-restricted research questions that might motivate research studies. In the case of my study, I was interested in developing the theory that classroom authority relationships are discursively influenced but are enacted only in the local, changeable context of a particular classroom. An ethnographic methodology was a good fit with the study's focus on local contexts, participant perception, and change over time.

Concerns about the usefulness of qualitative research have been raised, however. In her argument for increased use of quantitative research in composition and technical communication, Davida Charney cautions that the proliferation of qualitative studies in technical communication results in "a broad, shallow array of information, in which one study may touch loosely on another but in which no deep or complex networks of inferences and hypotheses are forged or tested" (590). But proponents of ethnographic methods claim that applying the goals of quantitative research—in Charney's case, replicability—to qualitative paradigms is not appropriate (Cooper 556). What, then, are the end goals of ethnographic research? A primary goal, as with most qualitative studies in rhetoric, is to examine how communicative acts occur in context (Doheny-Farina and Odell 507; Brodkey 36; Reinharz 46; Rentz 45). Ethnographic study provides opportunities for studying the discourse of cultures through observations of day-to-day patterns (Cresswell 59). And specific to the study I propose here, ethnographic research can be used to identify new phenomena for study that are important to a particular community (Rentz 45; Doheny-Farina and Odell 531; Reinharz 167).

In her critique of qualitative research, Charney rightly points out that "ethnographers' renderings of their experiences are just as selective and just as calculated as reports of large-scale experiments" (583). Some researchers have gone even a step further, claiming that the
way the researcher experiences an event is already interpreted; that interpretation is then compounded through the acts of note-taking, analyzing, and article drafting (Herndl 321; Grant-Davie 274; Brooke, "Ethnographic..." 15). I agree that ethnographic research and writing is experiential and interpretive; necessarily, then, my research would have occurred differently under another researcher, just as the authority relationships I observed would have been different with different students or a different instructor. In *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research*, Gesa Kirsch argues that openly situating our work "can help readers understand (rather than second-guess) what factors have shaped the research questions at hand; situated work also helps ground the research report in a specific cultural and historical moment" (14). In addition, I believe that ethnography (or at the very least, ethnographic elements) is necessary in order to study the phenomena of authority and power in the context in which they manifest, and the uniqueness of my study does not prohibit raising questions that may be important beyond my research and beyond the two specific classrooms I studied. By examining how authority construction occurs in these particular classroom settings, I identified a number of issues for further theoretical and practical consideration. In a research area that has seen so little attention, to isolate particular variables for quantitative study may have been pre-emptive, while ethnographic study left room to encounter issues that had not yet occurred to me or other researchers.

In addition, an ethnographic approach to studying authority relationships adheres to the theoretical claim I make throughout this dissertation—that the local context of a relationship or event matters, and the issues influencing that relationship or event cannot be considered in isolation (e.g., to consider the effects of gender on a communication act without also considering issues of race, class, and sexuality presents an incomplete picture).

Is there, then, any way that quantitative large-scale research can contribute to a consideration of classroom authority relationships? I believe there is. Once possible patterns and important issues have been defined through small-scale in-depth study, large-scale surveys could be used to determine the pervasiveness of a particular pattern or issue across

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11 I would argue that experimental, quantitative research is equally interpretive, from the selection of research variables and test subjects to the decisions made while writing the articles.

12 For this reason, I discuss my own positionality later in this chapter.
local contexts. The type of research conducted through this dissertation is a critical step in making such large-scale work possible.

**Feminist Action Research**

An important aspect of this study is that I define my research specifically as feminist. By feminist, I refer not to the content of my dissertation (although I demonstrate an interest in gender-related issues in my discussion of the data) but to the "feminist theoretical and ethical framework [that] distinguishes feminist research from other forms of inquiry" (Kirsch 1). In this section, I discuss three elements of feminist action research that I have attempted to address in my study: (1) researcher positionality, (2) collaboration and reciprocity, and (3) choice of research subjects and topics.

**Researcher Positionality**

Reacting against earlier positivist approaches to ethnography, feminist critics have argued for alternative modes of ethnography that "focus on interpretation, rely on the researcher's immersion in social settings, and aim for intersubjective understanding between researchers and the person(s) studied" (Reinharz 46). In order to effectively carry out this context-based approach, feminist research scholars recommend that researchers be self-reflexive concerning their own positionality within their research studies (e.g. Harding, Cooper, Reinharz). Positionality becomes crucial for effective research representation if we consider what Kirsch calls "standpoint theory, [which] postulates that what we believe counts as knowledge depends heavily on our cultural, social, and historical location" (15). Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater argues that "positionality includes the ethnographer's given attributes such as race, nationality, and gender which are fixed or culturally ascribed...Positionality is also shaped by subjective-contextual factors such as personal life history and experiences" (116). As a result, positionality influences how research participants view (and, therefore, interact with) researchers. Equally important, however, are the effects that positionality has on researchers' behaviors and attitudes toward their studies and research participants (Durst and Cook-Stanforth 71). Rather than ignore the effects of positionality on research, feminist scholars argue that researchers should openly acknowledge their own positionality to
research-participants and in presentations of research to a disciplinary audience (Chiseri-
Strater; Harding; Reinharz).

However, the issue of positionality extends beyond the data gathering and analysis
stages to include the way research is represented in published form to the disciplinary
communities from which/for which the study was conducted. The discourses of particular
communities affect not only the patterns researchers identify, but also the texts created from
the research (Herndl 325). During the writing phase, relativistic, interpretive aspects of the
research methodology may be undercut by disciplinary demands that research be presented
authoritatively (320).

What, then, can be done to maintain the epistemology behind ethnography through
the publication stage? While I do not believe it is possible to completely escape the
discourse demands of our disciplines in our publications, I do bring what Herndl calls the
"theoretical self-consciousness of the original research ethos" into the writing stage of my
ethnographic research (320). Robert Brooke models such an approach in his analysis of
producing "Underlife and Writing Instruction." Brooke outlines the interpretive choices he
made at three steps in the ethnographic writing process: taking observational notes, reflecting
on the data (what we might call "preliminary analysis"), and drafting the article
("Ethnographic...”). Brooke does not claim to have escaped the discursive expectations of the
discipline; in fact, he demonstrates their influence throughout all aspects of his study.
Instead, he offers an example of how ethnographic writing might remain self-consciously
reflective through the publication stage.

I draw from Brooke in setting up my own ethnographic text and have tried to make
my positionality visible both in discussions with participants and in written representations of
my role in the study. Many researchers, not all of whom identify as feminist, encourage
bringing participants into aspects of the research process that they normally would not
participate in, including interpretation and writing (Chiseri-Strater; Reinharz; Segal, et al.) in
order to provide alternative interpretations of the research as it is being conducted. In all

13 Not all researchers support this idea. Doheny-Farina and Odell argue against showing participants the
researcher's interpretation of events because "that practice can lead participants to try to conform to the
researcher’s interpretations; it can also make participants self-conscious and uncomfortable" (516). I find this
stages of my dissertation, I have attempted to include DW and Frida, my primary participants, in ways that would result in more clearly positioned and complicated arguments. This involvement manifested differently with each participant throughout the study. DW was active in designing research questions and engaged in frequent discussions with me about the study approach and the nature of authority. Frida, who had less time to work with me, limited most of her interaction to interpreting with me what was occurring in her own classroom. A particular goal of mine was to include the “voices” of participants in the writing of the research; to facilitate this, I sent portions of this text to Frida, DW, and those students whose contributions play a significant part in the final version of this dissertation. I have not, however, received much critical feedback from any participants as they are all busy with their own careers or continued schooling.

Collaboration and Reciprocity

A second goal of feminist research is to carry out studies that benefit the participants in their communities as well as the researcher and her community. This provides an additional reason to involve participants in planning, carrying out, and interpreting the study in ways that are useful to them. Powell and Takayoshi stress that ethical ethnographic research is both collaborative—“participants frame research questions, collect and interpret data, and respond to final written analyses”—and reciprocal, or mutually beneficial (396-7). Furthermore, feminist scholars have suggested that involving participants in the interpretation stages of the research is an important step toward non-oppressive, meaningful forms of research (Harding; Reinharz; Williams; Segal, et al.). In my study, I was particularly interested in including the instructors both as collaborative partners and as mutual beneficiaries. First, because my study of instructor authority could have been potentially threatening for an instructor attempting to successfully direct a semester course, I invited the participants to participate in as many aspects of the process as possible to alleviate some of their concerns. This included having the instructors help frame how the research would be presented to students and sharing tentative conclusions with them throughout the semester. Second, including the instructors’ perspectives at both the data analysis and
writing stages gave my study a multi-voicedness that could not have been achieved if only my own interpretations were considered.

More importantly, however, I sought ways to make our interaction beneficial to the instructors as well as to me. In "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," Ellen Cushman writes of the importance of activism in academics' work. In the case of my work with lecturers, my relative power to them was not great, but I did engage in activities that would be beneficial to them, such as exploring new teaching approaches and tactics, asking questions on student surveys that would provide useful feedback to the instructors about their teaching, and engaging in cross-classroom activities with one of the instructors. In addition, I believe it is important to engage the challenges of DW’s and Frida’s status as lecturers, which greatly impacted their ability to form authority relationships with their students that they found consistent and ideal. As a first step in addressing the problems of this system, I have raised this topic in my dissertation. In addition, I provided a letter of support for DW that he used in his successful application for a full-time position at another institution.

Choice of Research Subjects/Topics

Some scholars claim that an important criterion of feminist research is that it be by women, about women, and for women. Shulamit Reinharz, for example, writes, “feminist ethnography is research carried out by feminists who focus on gender issues in female-homogenous traditional or nontraditional settings, and in heterogeneous traditional and nontraditional settings” (55). While I agree that feminist research must take care to consider how gender and sexuality affect and are affected by their settings, I do not believe that all feminist research must focus exclusively—or even predominantly—on gender and sexuality. Feminist concerns can extend to consideration of hierarchies not bound solely gender. In my study, for example, a crucial hierarchical power structure that influenced the work of the instructors I studied was their status as lecturers—a low-paying, temporary university status in a field (writing instruction) that has already been identified as “feminized” (Dragga; Gregory; Susan Miller). As a result, although one of my participants was male, and I am aware of possible effects that the gender of the instructors and their students may have had on the authority relationships in the classrooms, I believe that addressing the common institutional status of Frida and DW is in line with feminist research goals.
THE PARTICIPANTS

The primary participants in my study were the researcher (me), two instructors of English 314, and a total of 45 students in one of each of their sections. The description for English 314 appears as follows in the 2003-2005 course catalog:

**English 314. Technical Communication. Credit 3.**
Prerequisite: 105 [first-year composition], junior classification. Theories, principles, and processes of effective written communication in the technical disciplines. Attention to the major strategies for composing technical discourse; techniques of analyzing audiences and writing situations, and for organizing data and information.

English 314 at Iowa State is taught to students majoring in engineering, agriculture, and science. Some English majors also take the course, but most register for a special section reserved for technical communication majors. As a result, there are frequently only 1-2 students in an English 314 section from humanities majors. The instructors of the course, however, usually hold humanities degrees, typically in some branch of English Studies. Some of these instructors (but not the majority) have worked as technical communicators in the past. In addition, because the course is required for a large number of students, many cannot get into the class until their final year. As a result, a high percentage of the students in an English 314 class will graduate at the end of the semester or after the following semester. These students have frequently completed one or more internships before taking English 314 and so have some experience in on-the-job technical communication.

The Researcher

When I began this study, I had been a graduate student teaching assistant for four years. I had not taught the technical communication course before but had taught similar courses such as business communication and report/proposal writing, which also enrolled primarily juniors and seniors from a wide range of majors. I was personally interested in the topic of instructor-student classroom authority because I believed it had influenced my own teaching in a variety of ways over the previous four years. I was also highly focused on identifying gender and sexuality aspects of classroom authority, in large part, because I had just left a dissertation topic in that area when my first major professor changed jobs.
I had completed two courses in research methodology and two small-scale qualitative classroom studies before beginning my dissertation, so I knew from the start that I wanted to conduct feminist ethnographic research. I had a relatively high level of confidence approaching the study, and at the same time, I was attuned to potential challenges that might arise because I had read extensively about ethical issues in research. I hoped to engage my instructor-participants in egalitarian relationships in which they were able to determine the direction of the study as much as I did.

Initially, I approached the study from my perspective as an instructor and influenced by literature on classroom authority, which typically focuses on the instructor's role in relation to students. I decided to add student surveys and post-semester interviews relatively late in the planning process. A number of my preliminary precautions involved trying to protect the instructors from negative effects if students discovered I was studying authority. As a result of my own instructor perspective, I initially focused on instructor-student authority relationships as antagonistic, and I did not recognize the importance of considering student-student authority until after I had begun my observations.

The Instructors

Both of the instructors in my study were lecturers—semi-permanent teaching faculty who are non-tenurable. Most lecturers' employment and teaching schedules are determined on a semester-to-semester or year-to-year basis, so many do not know whether or not they will continue to have a job beyond the current semester. In the English department, lecturers are not required to serve on departmental or university committees, and many have second jobs teaching at another higher education institution or working as technical communicators for companies in the surrounding area.

Frida and DW fit my basic criteria for the study—one male and one female who were both American, had previous experience teaching 314, and were scheduled to teach at times that fit my own schedule. The first male instructor I approached declined to participate because he disagreed with my decision to use an ethnographic approach. Frida and DW were the second and third instructors I approached, and after I outlined my ideas for the study and how I would try to protect the privacy and normal functioning of the classes, they agreed to participate.
Frida Ortega

Frida is a former master’s student in the Iowa State English department. After graduating, she left Iowa State for a semester but returned as a lecturer during the Fall 2000 semester. Prior to moving to Iowa, Frida had worked for 13 years as a technical writer with five major corporations. During the semester I observed her class, she continued to work 40+ hours per week as a project manager for Midwest Trust, a large banking company 30 minutes from Iowa State, while teaching three sections at Iowa State.

In the past, Frida had taught high school and later first-year composition. Prior to the semester I observed her, Frida had already taught English 314 twice before. She felt comfortable with the material covered; however, she did choose to use a new textbook in the semester I observed her because students had expressed dislike of the previous textbook. Changing textbooks required Frida to make a number of adjustments to her syllabus both before the semester started and during the first few weeks of classes.

Frida and I had worked together as master’s students, when we shared an office. Although we did not have classes together, we had participated in some of the same activities and attended the same department social events. We shared similar political beliefs and a basic teaching philosophy. We felt comfortable chatting with each other, and that was reflected in our interviews, which took place at her home and in restaurants. Frida was comfortable speaking with me in front of the students before and after class or during in-class group work. During class, she occasionally called on me to respond to a question and on a few occasions asked me to help the class by participating in an activity or running an errand.

Through conversation with Frida throughout the semester, I developed a sense of her teaching philosophy. She believes that as a highly experienced technical communicator, she has valuable information to impart to the students in her class. She believes that her expertise comes not from her academic knowledge (which is considerable) but from her status as a practitioner, who continues to work in the field she teaches in. Frida teaches students to think of writing in technical communication as a system that can be adapted and applied in work situations. She encourages the students to see technical communication as a blend of science and art. From a pedagogical standpoint, Frida believes that an informal classroom setting is the best environment for working effectively with advanced
undergraduate students; she encourages a friendly atmosphere in which students chat and joke with her and each other.¹⁴

DW

DW holds a Ph.D. in literature and has extensive experience teaching English—including literature, linguistics, creative writing, and professional communication—at several institutions. DW came to Iowa State three years prior to my study, when he was hired on a three-year teaching contract. At the time of the study, that three-year contract had ended, and he was teaching on a semester-by-semester basis. This uncertainty led DW to spend some of his time during the semester preparing his own job materials in the event that Iowa State not hire him back for the spring. Ultimately, they did hire him back; however, he left the following fall for a permanent position at another institution.

During the fall semester, DW did not work outside of Iowa State. In addition to teaching a second section of English 314, he was also teaching a course in Business Communication. In the 1980s, DW worked as an accountant while attending graduate school, but since earning his Ph.D., he has worked solely as a college instructor. DW taught technical communication and technical editing for six years in the University of Tennessee system and taught English 314 at Iowa State each semester since he arrived in 1999. During the semester I observed his class, DW was using a textbook he had used in previous semesters; however, he was implementing new approaches to some of his assignments, including in-depth class review of each other's papers. These new elements in his class required DW to pay close attention to how the semester unfolded and to make some changes in deadlines as needed.

Prior to approaching DW about participating in my study, I had never interacted with him. The majority of our meetings occurred in the English department building, either in DW's office or in the writing center. DW shared his office with two other instructors and preferred to meet with me at times when they were not present; it was usually easy to accommodate this request. Later in the semester, DW mentioned that he would feel comfortable sharing a meal with me during our interviews, so we scheduled our meetings

¹⁴ I will discuss more about Frida and DW’s teaching philosophy and how that impacted their authority relationships with students in the following chapters.
after the semester at restaurants during the afternoon. In class, DW preferred to focus his attention on the students and typically did not interact with me. After class ended, he and I would walk to his office and hold our conversations about the class there. Often these conversations would last 20-40 minutes and would include discussion of topics such as teaching philosophy, research methodology, or ethics in addition to specific conversation about DW’s class for that day.

Briefly, DW believes that expertise in technical communication is the logical relationship between concepts and successful outcomes—being able to successfully apply at the right time concepts that have been learned. An effective technical communicator brings a range of theoretical knowledge to each writing situation, and then makes rhetorical decisions about how to proceed in that situation (by employing and/or resisting the theoretical knowledge available to him/her). For this reason, he does not believe that he can make the students in the class expert technical communicators. Instead, he sees himself teaching techné, which he defines as the space between concepts and application. He wants

To give them the knowing what and the knowing how, so when they face an actual situation, they are prepared. Techné is going to give the students the concepts to become experts. It’s the abstract foundation, but it’s not all that’s involved in expertise. Expertise is also dependent on how they respond to a situation; how they’re able to marshal the concepts and react to the kairos. (DW interview 10/21/03 [p. 2])

To help the students move beyond learning concepts, DW presents information from the textbook as theory based on research that he and the students must test through actual writing situations. For this reason, he introduces a large number of sample technical communication documents in class from a variety of fields. Rather than lecturing on a particular concept, DW prefers to raise questions about a sample text and have the students generate the information on the concepts themselves. DW does not want students to view him as an expert on technical communication but wants the students to begin making informed decisions of their own. In class, DW deliberately avoids presenting himself as an expert on the documents or concepts introduced; instead, he often relies on students to act as disciplinary experts.
The Students

My work with the majority of the students in the study was more limited than with Frida and DW. Many of the students only interacted with me during surveys that I conducted four times during the semester; however, several in each class engaged with me during the class and participated in interviews following the fall semester. Not only were the two classes different in the ways they engaged their instructors and each other, they also had radically different interactions with me as the researcher.

Frida’s Class

Frida’s class was held on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:40-2:00. On Tuesdays, the class met in a Macintosh computer lab in Ross Hall; on Thursdays the class was assigned to a traditional classroom in another building, but due to scheduling glitches, the class occupied four different classrooms during the first four weeks (a disruptive situation that had a significant effect on the early portions of the semester). Frida’s class was made up primarily of seniors and included 17 men and 7 women. Of the 24 students in the class, 12 were engineering majors, 7 were agriculture majors, and the remaining students came from a variety of majors (for a complete breakdown of students by college and major, see the survey data in Appendix C).

The students in Frida’s class tended to be talkative and relaxed. The class engaged in a lot of joking with each other and with Frida. Significantly more students in Frida’s class than in DW’s felt comfortable speaking with me and asking questions about my study. In addition, some students asked me for help with their class work, and four students even invited me to observe their off-campus group work.

DW’s Class

DW’s class was held on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9-9:50. On Mondays and Wednesdays, the class met in a small, traditional classroom, and on Fridays, they met in a Macintosh computer lab in the same building. DW’s class was made up primarily of seniors and included 14 men and 8 women. Of the 22 students in the class, 13 were engineering majors, 3 were agricultural majors, and the rest came from a variety of departments across campus (a complete breakdown by major can be found in Appendix C).
The students in DW’s class did not interact with one another or the instructor to the extent that Frida’s students did. A few students would chat before class (usually those who had classes together outside of English 314), but there was much less “noise” in DW’s class before, during, and after class. However, the majority of students in DW’s class appeared to feel confident speaking on writing topics in their field when called on by DW, and the class as a whole treated all speakers—instructor and students—with attention and respect.

Consistent with the low interaction with one another, the students in DW’s class did not interact with me to any great degree. Only three of the students spoke with me over the course of the semester, and typically these were very brief interactions; however, in situations where I addressed one or more students (for example, when I gave the surveys), the students were attentive and willing to participate. One possible reason for the difference in the amount of interaction with Frida’s class and DW’s may be that DW’s students rarely saw me interacting with DW in the classroom setting, while Frida often chatted with me in front of the class or invited me to participate in classroom discussions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Because I had engaged in small-scale qualitative studies prior to the dissertation, I began this project aware of the importance of a clearly laid out plan for research. In this section, I describe my research questions, data-gathering, and data analysis.

Research Questions

Scholarship on ethnography (Brooke; Doheny-Farina and Odell; Newkirk) indicates that narrowly defining research questions at the beginning of a study implies expectations that may be limiting; at the same time, beginning the study without research questions can result in unfocused—and therefore, less useful—data gathering during the first few weeks. For this reason, I established a short list of preliminary research questions prior to the study that I continued to revise and refine throughout the process of data collection and analysis. As I mentioned earlier, I initially approached the study focused almost solely on the instructor’s authority role in relation to students, and I tended to view instructor-student authority as inherently contentious. This early bias is reflected in my preliminary questions:
• What moves do I see the instructor make that seem to be related to authority construction?
  o At what point in the semester do the moves occur?
  o Are these moves typically explicit or subtle?
  o Are these moves delivered to the students orally and/or in text (i.e. course policy sheets, assignment sheets, emails, etc)?
  o Are these moves delivered to the students as a group or on an individual basis?

• What is the instructor’s intention when making particular authority moves?

• How do students perceive the instructor’s authority?

• How are the instructor’s moves influenced by her/his perception of student reactions?

• What roles do the gender of the instructor and students play in authority construction?

Based on these research questions, I developed an observation guide at the beginning of the semester that contained a list of phenomena to watch for during each observation. Following each class period, I would make notes on each of the phenomena I had looked for during that class. As the semester progressed, I made additions and deletions to this list that allowed me to focus my attention in particular areas. For example, as the semester continued, I began actively considering the ways in which students were authorities for each other. My late semester notes and the final student survey reflect this addition to my research interests. Appendix A includes two sample observation guides—one from the beginning and one from week 13—to give an idea of the type of phenomena I looked for and how my research focus changed over time.

**Data Gathering**

Shulamit Reinharz writes, “contemporary ethnography or fieldwork is multimethod research. It usually includes observation, participation, archival analysis, and interviewing, thus combining the assets and weaknesses of each method” (46). In keeping with this definition, I gathered information over the semester through a variety of methods, using what Doheny-Farina and Odell have called “methodological triangulation.” Doheny-Farina and Odell claim that using a variety of data-gathering methods allows researchers to “test emerging patterns by increasing the possibility of finding negative cases and countering the
bias of any one approach” (510). I am not convinced that it is possible (or even desirable) to achieve the objectivity the authors’ claim implies; however, I do believe that employing a variety of methods gave me access to areas of information that could have been missed using a single method.

Before beginning the study during the fall semester, I conducted a two-day pilot of my methods in a colleague’s business communication classroom. In this brief pilot, I looked for evidence that the methods I had selected (observation, instructor interview, etc.) could elicit information related to the types of questions I wanted to ask. During that pilot study, I also tested the student surveys for clarity and the types and usefulness of the information they elicited. Based on my research plan and the pilot, I employed a variety of methods in the main study, which are detailed below.

**Observation**

Throughout the semester, I attended almost all meetings of one section each taught by Frida and DW. During the class, I took notes on what I observed and heard, paying particular attention to any behaviors by the instructors or students that appeared at the time to involve authority construction and/or resistance. While in the classroom, I tried to sit in out-of-the way seats and to make notes continuously, including when the students were engaged in individual writing, to avoid distracting the participants as much as possible.

Early in the semester, I borrowed from techniques modeled by other ethnographic researchers to begin my observation effectively. Similar to Robert Brooke, I tried in my earliest observations to record as many details that might be relevant as possible; this included gender, race, dress, style and frequency of speech, body language, and anything else I could tell from observing and listening to the students and instructor. Borrowing from Miles and Huberman, I spent some time sketching the various classrooms and labs. Whenever possible, I tried to note down the type of “thick description” championed by Clifford Geertz that would be useful to me when writing my data into a dissertation. Early in the semester and again at mid-term, I made notes about the physical presentation of the instructor in terms of dress, physical location in the room, and speaking style.

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15 I did not initially worry about taking notes continuously, until DW mentioned that seeing me start to write led him to begin mentally checking what he had just said or done.
As the semester progressed, I most frequently recorded

- conversations in which the instructor or a student claimed some sort of 'authority' on a topic and what that authority was based on (e.g., past experiences in the university or outside of it, information from a textbook)
- instances where students disagreed openly with the instructor's assignments and/or interpretations/explanations
- instructor reactions to instances when students claimed some form of expertise on a topic or disagreed with the instructor
- instances where students seemed—non-verbally or in conversations to one another—to be resisting the instructor, an assignment, or the class
- student interactions with one another, where one student assumed the role of "teacher" in relation to the other

In the classroom, I recorded my notes on a pad of paper, and then typed them up in my office following the class. As I typed my field notes, I included initial interpretations and commentary on the process of gathering the data, particularly what types of phenomena I should look for in my next observation. At the end of the semester, I had accumulated 325 single-spaced pages of typed field notes and 130 single-spaced pages of initial interpretations.

**Instructor interviews**

Because I had more access to Frida and DW than to the students, I interviewed both of the instructors extensively. I used these interviews with the instructors as a sort of "member check," to compare my interpretations to those of the instructor-participant; more importantly, I wanted the instructors to play a role in the interpretation and analysis of the data in order to focus on conclusions that were of interest to them and more well-developed than if all interpretation had come from me. The interviews I conducted consisted of two main types: (1) brief interviews following each class to elicit the instructor's perceptions of that particular class period, and (2) periodic longer interviews to discuss themes and patterns in the class as a whole.

In the brief interviews, I asked Frida and DW about their performances that day, the rationale for the activities, the particular successes and/or failures of the class period, and the sense they had of the students in their section. After the first couple of interviews, I found
that the instructors controlled the direction of the conversation based on what was on their minds following class; typically, their comments answered any questions I had without my asking. During each interview, I took field notes on a pad of paper and then typed them up in my office following the class. As with the observational notes, I included initial interpretations and commentary along with my transcript of the conversation.

I also met with each instructor individually on three occasions for semi-structured interviews about the class as a whole, including the instructor’s goals and any overarching patterns established in the class. These longer interviews were audio-taped with the permission of both instructors. The first of these interviews took place during the week before class started. Frida and I met at her home in Des Moines, while I met DW in his office at Iowa State. At that time, I asked Frida and DW to identify their specific goals for the course, the policies they had established, the rationale behind the assignments, and their general approach to teaching. Each of these initial interviews lasted over an hour.

The second interview took place during week six of the semester. I met Frida for supper at a restaurant in Ames, and DW and I met in the writing center. In each of these interviews, I was interested in finding out how the instructor perceived the progression of the class and her or his sense of the students. Frida and DW talked about their plans for the rest of the semester and some of their ideas for adjusting to particular challenges that had arisen in the classroom. I also used the second interview as a chance to question them about patterns I noticed in the class and to do some direct comparison between the two classrooms by asking them to respond to some of the activities taking place in the other class (as I reported them).16

Following the semester, I spent several months conducting analysis and reading. During this time, I was in regular contact (primarily by email) with DW, who was still teaching at Iowa State. In March, he and I met for a final formal interview at a restaurant in Ames. In that interview, we reviewed the patterns and key points from the semester surveys. I also shared with him a summary of findings from student interviews. At that time, we also discussed the main arguments I had chosen to make in my dissertation. By the spring...

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16 To preserve Frida and DW’s anonymity, I never met with the instructors at the same time or revealed their identities to one another. The large size of Iowa State’s English department and the relative lack of connection among most lecturers made it possible for me to preserve their confidentiality in this way.
semester, Frida, however, was no longer teaching at Iowa State. Instead she was working long hours for Midwest Trust. As a result, and because she was disappointed with the outcome of the 314 section I had observed (Frida's relationship with several of the students had been contentious), she did not have time or interest to meet with me for several months. We did meet at a restaurant in Des Moines the following fall, where we identified together some of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the class. At that time, I also gave her chapters of my dissertation to read.

By the end of the study, I had accumulated 140 single-spaced pages of typed instructor interview notes and transcripts.

Student surveys

It was important to me to access the students' perceptions of the class and their authority relationships to the instructor and each other. At the same time, I had concerns that questioning the students about the instructor in a class or focus group setting could lead to discontent with the class and problems for the instructor because the students might feel more encouraged to challenge the instructor's authority. For this reason, I elicited student perceptions via surveys that would be filled out individually, which I hoped would avoid some potential problems.

I designed the surveys in conjunction with Frida and DW. After discussing their teaching philosophies and goals for the class, I asked each instructor to develop a list of 8-12 adjectives that described how they would like students to perceive them. Developing their own descriptors made it possible for Frida and DW to learn if the students experience the instructor-student relationship as the instructor intended. To help them to create a list of such adjectives, I gave them a sample list of 12 items designed by another Ph.D. student. Frida chose to use the list developed by the Ph.D. student without making changes. DW chose to delete five of the suggested terms and added two of his own (see Figure 3.1 for a list of the

\(^{17}\) A similar problem had arisen the year before when a TA agreed to have another Ph.D. student-researcher observe her class and conduct focus group interviews with the students. During the focus-group discussions, some students raised concerns that were then discussed with the researcher, but not with the TA. As a result, everyone in the class had access to conversations about the class and the instructor with the exception of the instructor herself, who was not allowed to know the content of the conversations. The result was a difficult semester for both the instructor and the students. In designing my study, I hoped to avoid similar problems but was only partially successful.
adjectives each participant chose; complete copies of all surveys can be found in Appendix B). As a result, I ended with a cross-over of seven words that were included on both Frida and DW’s surveys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frida’s Selected Adjectives</th>
<th>DW’s Selected Adjectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>credible</td>
<td>credible</td>
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<tr>
<td>engaging</td>
<td>engaging</td>
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<tr>
<td>approachable</td>
<td>approachable</td>
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<tr>
<td>dependable</td>
<td>dependable</td>
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<tr>
<td>challenging</td>
<td>challenging</td>
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<tr>
<td>fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>open-minded</td>
<td>open-minded</td>
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<tr>
<td>understanding</td>
<td>focused</td>
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<tr>
<td>rigorous</td>
<td>unbiased</td>
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<tr>
<td>informed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>knowledgeable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caring</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 3.1 – Adjectives instructors used on surveys to describe themselves**

I also included a question on each survey that asked the students what concept or skill they hoped to learn and/or what the most important concept or skill was that they had learned. I originally included this question primarily as a useful tool for the instructors when planning future courses, however, I found that responses to those questions also helped me determine what students believed they knew and what types of knowledge they valued. The fourth survey asked students to summarize their feelings about the semester and to comment on their authority relationships with other students in the class. At the bottom of each survey, I left space for students to give additional comments on “the student-instructor relationship in this classroom.” Ultimately, while the scaled adjective portion of the surveys did allow me to draw a few conclusions about students as a group and over time, it was the written comments on each survey that provided the most useful information.

During weeks 1, 5, 10, and 15, the students in each class took 5-10 minutes to fill out the surveys. During the surveys, the instructor waited outside the class in the hall to allow students to feel free to make comments or ask questions. On the first survey, I asked the students...
students to identify themselves by major and gender, so I could make comparisons within the class. I also asked them to select a pseudonym, which they would use on subsequent surveys. This allowed me to make comparisons over time, while preserving students’ anonymity (blank copies of the surveys can be found in Appendix B).

**Student Interviews**

At the beginning of the spring semester, when the students from Frida and DW’s classes had already received their semester grades, I held interviews with some of the students from each class. My original plan was to hold two focus groups—one with 4-6 students from Frida’s class, and one with 4-6 students from DW’s class; however, low student interest in DW’s class and difficulty scheduling a time with students from Frida’s class forced me to use alternative methods. In the end, I conducted three face-to-face and two email interviews with students from Frida’s class and one face-to-face and four email interviews with students from DW’s class.

In the email interviews, I posed 2-7 short, open-ended questions to each student and asked him or her to answer one or more questions (the number and type of questions I sent depended on a number of factors, including whether the students claimed to be highly interested in participating, whether students indicated they had limited time to respond to questions, and whether they were currently at Iowa State or away on internships). In particular, for those students out of town for co-ops, internships, or full-time jobs, I asked about their own technical communication credibility and ability to apply the skills of the class in their work. Questions I asked in the email interviews included:

- What were the biggest strengths and weaknesses of class?
- Do you think you are a more competent and credible technical communicator now than you were before the fall semester? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
- Have you used material from English 314 for your work in other classes or your job? If so, how?
- What event(s) stand out in your mind as important about the way you perceived the instructor?

19 Students had difficulty remembering the pseudonyms they had chosen, so I made a list of all the pseudonyms with no names attached that students could consult to jog their memories. In one instance, this led to confusion—two people used the same pseudonym for survey #2, but on the whole, this system seemed to work.
• What student(s) seemed particularly knowledgeable, expert, etc. to you? In what way?
• What did you contribute to the class and/or your small group in terms of knowledge, expertise, etc.?
• Is there anything else you want to tell me about the class?

In the face-to-face interviews, I prepared a list of open-ended questions that I asked each student. Based on their responses, I asked follow-up questions. In the interviews, I also discussed briefly the differences between the two classes and asked the students to hypothesize why their own class occurred as it did. The face-to-face interviews began with the following basic questions:

• What is an ideal authority relationship between teachers and students?
• How does that ideal fit or not fit your interaction with Frida/DW?
• What student was particularly an expert or authority in your class?
• Were you able to demonstrate your own authority and expertise in the class? In your small group? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?
• Do you consider yourself to be more competent and credible as a technical communicator than you were before you took this class? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?
• Have you had an opportunity to use the skills you developed in 314 in your work or your other classes?
• What event(s) stand out in your mind as important to the way authority was enacted in the class?
• What were the biggest strengths and weaknesses of the class?
• Are there other things about the class that you want to tell me about?

Data Analysis
Throughout data analysis, I drew on the approach of grounded theory, described by Strauss and Corbin as a qualitative research method that allows patterns and theories to emerge inductively from the data collected but that is ultimately more than a description of what occurred. I conducted on-going analysis throughout the data-gathering phase of my research. Following each class period, I typed up my notes from the observation and the brief instructor interview; in my notes, I included immediate impressions in terms of patterns I spotted and/or possible comparisons to the other class. Adapting Miles and Huberman's
suggestion of contact summary sheets, I wrote 2-3 pages of initial interpretations of each class, using the observation guide I had created. This approach helped me to engage the data while it was still fresh in my mind rather than at a distance of several months. My early analysis influenced later instances of data gathering, most notably in terms of what I chose to note down and what phenomena I stopped trying to find; this allowed me to make necessary adjustments to my research while I was still on-site. Once a week, I used my initial interpretation sheets to revise my observation guide for the following week, which allowed me to refine my research questions and process as I moved more deeply into the study.

As the semester progressed, I employed other forms of data-analysis to search for new patterns and to keep my observational “gaze” fresh. For example, I created vignettes on particular students using the guidelines established by Miles and Huberman (one of those vignettes became the case study in chapter 6 of this dissertation). I also coded instructor behavior and comments from particular classes according to the adjectives they had chosen to define themselves in the surveys. When I noticed what appeared to be an imbalance in which students participated in DW’s class, I created a table analyzing when students spoke and the types of comments they made.

Following the semester, I created a series of loose coding categories that I used to reconsider the observational notes and interview transcripts I had taken throughout the semester. I particularly looked for instances when the notes did not support the patterns I had identified. At the same time, I used my re-reading of the notes to identify new patterns which I had not previously noticed.

In my analysis of the surveys, I used the written comments to better understand students’ goals for the course and their perceptions of how the course proceeded. I used the Likert scale portion of the survey to compare the students by class, gender, and college. Some interesting patterns emerged from this survey data to support or refute my interpretations of the class.

Throughout the data analysis process, I used the after-class and semi-structured interviews with the instructors to elicit their impressions and test my interpretations. In several instances, Frida or DW’s insistence on a particular explanation for an event or pattern led me to re-examine the classroom setting in a new way. In addition, I tried to include some
hypothesis-testing in my face-to-face interviews with the students, asking them how they would interpret patterns I had identified from the class. After the semester, I continued to involve Frida and DW in the analysis process by sharing pieces of the text as I drafted it. Both instructors had the opportunity to give me feedback, which could then lead me to revise my text. Relatively late in the process, I also shared pieces of the text with several students whose words and experiences I used extensively in the text. I asked the students to indicate to me the accuracy in how I presented them. In general, I found that while all the participants provided feedback in emails and face-to-face conversations, they made few comments on the final text, perhaps because they were busy and no longer invested in a class from a year before, and perhaps because in draft form, my analysis seemed much more “set” than it had in conversation.

The methods I used to complete my ethnographic study allowed me to conduct preliminary inquiry into the complicated authority relationships that occur between instructors and students. This open-ended, multi-method approach prepared the way for future research that could focus on particular aspects of the student-instructor relationship and identify patterns across large numbers of classrooms. My research with Frida, DW, and their students resulted in several interesting findings about authority relationships that are discussed in the next three chapters. In chapter 4, I explore specific aspects of the instructor-student authority relationship in both classrooms. In chapter 5, I consider the students’ authority relationships to one another, and in chapter 6, I look at a case study example of one female engineering student and the ways she enacted an authority relationship with Frida and the other students in her class.
Chapter 4: Instructor-Student Authority Relationships

On the first day of the semester, DW entered the classroom after the students and began establishing the pattern he would rely on throughout the semester. Without introducing himself, he distributed 3x5 index cards, asking the students to fill them out with their names, majors, etc. and then pass them to the front. Next, DW handed out copies of a textbook definition of “technical communication.” Using the 3x5 cards, DW randomly called on students to answer questions about how the components of the definition are applied in their disciplines. Some of the students responded with “I don’t really know” or “I’m not sure,” but whether students gave an answer or not, DW continued through the stack of cards, calling on each student in turn.

My initial reaction was that DW ran his class according to a very traditional model. His use of directed questions and answers seemed to follow a familiar IRE (initiate-respond-evaluate) pattern—in a typical interaction, DW asked a question, the student responded, DW paraphrased the response and asked a follow-up question or moved on to the next student.

But as the days continued, I began to notice more going on in the classroom than simply call-and-response. Although the first few students DW called on responded tentatively, they quickly began to speak with greater confidence. By the end of the first week, the students were no longer flustered when DW called on them using the 3x5 cards. They became more comfortable being called on to speak as experts in their disciplines, and they made greater claims to authority as they did so.

And DW’s questions, far from being tests of students’ knowledge as might be expected in an IRE pattern, often appeared to be genuine. From the beginning of the semester, he called on students with seeming confidence that because of their academic and professional expertise they would be able to answer his questions, and once a student offered an answer, he rarely corrected it or indicated it might not be a good answer. In fact, DW’s directed questioning—calling on specific students to speak as experts from their fields—became the primary mode of instruction in the class, almost completely replacing direct instruction from DW.

So as the semester went on, I began to see the instructor-student interaction in DW’s class in a new light. But what was the students’ perception? Well, at the end of the first month of class, an outside evaluator attended the class, and the students confided to her that they “loathed” the 3x5 cards because waiting for their names to come up made them nervous. DW threw out the cards, but otherwise, the class continued the same pattern of directed questioning. And despite their concerns early in the semester, by the end, the students expressed approval in surveys and interviews for the discussion style that allowed them to show their own expertise while learning from the expertise of others.
The narrative above describes just one element of a semester long process where students and instructor in a technical communication class drew on the shaping influences of institutional structure/practice and professional expertise to develop a workable system for creating and disseminating knowledge. In this chapter, I discuss in-depth the discursive structures that influenced the formation of authority relationships between instructors and students in the classrooms I studied, the ways in which those authority relationships were maintained and altered over the course of the semester, and how discursive structures enabled and constrained those relationships.

Discursive structures are those formations underlying a particular discipline or culture that focus and constrain the direction that discipline or culture can take. Discursive structures exist as abstracted possibilities that manifest in local situations, which are directed by the discursive structures but do not result in a predetermined, replicable outcome. And while discursive structures do limit “the field of strategic possibilities,” their presence allows individuals with diverse experiences to accomplish work through their shared discourse about that work and the cultures and disciplines they inhabit. When underlying shared structures are not present, individuals may find it difficult to begin work and may even disagree on the work that should be accomplished or the best ways to accomplish that work.

In college classrooms, authority relationships between instructors and students are influenced by a number of external discursive structures but manifest differently in each classroom. As a result, no two teaching or learning experiences will ever be the same although they may be influenced by common discursive structures (many instructors have experienced this phenomenon when an activity or assignment that succeeds in one section fails in another). Each person arrives at the class site with ideas about how classroom work and instructor-student authority relationships proceed, based on her or his experiences in previous classes, which likely provided a variety of models of classroom management and relationships. Each individual’s “rules” must then be negotiated with others in the class to constitute a local classroom structure.

Although each person’s actual classroom experiences may be slightly or radically different from everyone else’s, I believe the presence of common underlying discursive structures allows most classes to quickly move beyond initial classroom management to
focus instead on the work of the semester. When discursive structures—those underlying, pre-existing "rules" described above—are shared, they enable individual classes to quickly construct a framework that will guide their relationships over the course of the semester. As shown in the narrative above, DW and his class were able to quickly create distinctive patterns of communication and relationships of authority despite the varied experiences that DW and the students brought to the class.

But authority relationships, once established, continue to be enabled and constrained by the discursive structures that brought them into being. Although initial negotiation of authority occurs quickly, instructors and students continue this negotiation each time they assert or choose not to assert authority in relation to one another. Frida's class provided an example of this ongoing negotiation because, as I will discuss on page 66, although they established initial authority relationships that allowed them to begin the work of the course, the constraints of underlying discursive structures and the students' and Frida's sometimes divergent perceptions of those structures led to continuing negotiation of critical aspects of the instructor-student authority relationship—and the curriculum—well into the semester.

Although authority relationships manifest locally and cannot be replicated, I believe that some common discursive structures underlie most technical communication classrooms. Identifying common structures and patterns that result in subsequent authority relationships makes it possible for instructors—and to a lesser extent, students—to recognize more fully those structures impacting their classrooms and the ways in which their pedagogical decisions resist or support those decisions. In turn, this knowledge may allow instructors and students to make informed choices in their attempts to establish pedagogically sound authority relationships in their classrooms. My goal, then, is to demonstrate the ways in which discursive structures influence local authority relationships, so instructors and students can make deliberate, consistent choices when asserting authority in relation to one another.

In the classrooms I observed, two discursive structures in particular played significant—and often, competing—roles in constituting instructor-student authority relationships. First, the institutional structure of the university, in particular the relative status of those in the class, placed the instructor in a hierarchical position of authority over the students, a structure that the instructors and students I observed could problematize but
never completely escape. At the same time, authority relationships in the two classrooms were further complicated by the different types of expertise claimed by those in the class. When the students had disciplinary expertise that the instructor did not (a common occurrence in technical communication classrooms), they were able to assert authority in ways not supported by a traditional institutional structure. Disparities in the ways in which various types of disciplinary expertise were valued by the instructor, the students, and the institution led to disruptions in instructor-student authority relationships. Other discursive structures influencing the classroom, such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and class proved more difficult to isolate within the context of the classroom. In this chapter, I discuss how institutional structure and disciplinary expertise influenced the authority relationships between the instructors and students in my study. At the end of the chapter, I briefly discuss gender, as an example of one of several less tangible discursive structures influencing classroom authority relationships.

**INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE**

When I refer to institutional structure, I am speaking about commonly received notions of appropriate roles and behavior within the academic setting. In many college classrooms, institutional status is the only “named” power in the room; i.e., the construction of the classroom in the western educational system hinges on there being an instructor who wields knowledge/power and students who accept that knowledge/power through their role as learners. On the most basic level, the university supports the authority of instructors over their students. To borrow the language of Foucault, institutional structure and practices create a “system of differentiations” by which instructors and students are defined by the degree to which each is “permitted to act upon the actions of [the other]” (“The Subject...” 792). While actual manifestations of instructor-student relationships are complex and varied, the authority relationship is generally a hierarchical one. This familiar view that instructors have “power over” their students is reinforced by common practices at most higher education institutions, where the instructor plans the course, guides class discussion, and grades individual students.

The relative status accorded by the institution is not the only discursive structure operating in a classroom, but it is perhaps the first to influence each classroom—a structure
instructors and students can rely on and use at the beginning of the semester when effects of other structures (e.g., expertise, gender, sexuality, race) have not yet been manifested. This claim was supported by the statements of the students in my study; several times, when describing perceived “weaknesses” of their classes (some of which occurred very early in the semester), several students made comments such as, “I lost respect for [the instructor] almost right away I have to say” (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 2]) and “That took my respect down” (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 9]). Patterns of survey response also support this idea that the instructors experienced initial student support: students in Frida and DW’s classes rated them relatively high in most areas on Survey 1, administered during Week 1 (Frida received a combined average of 5.78/7.00; DW received a 5.42/7). The conclusion could be drawn, therefore, that the instructors began the semester with a certain amount of respect (or authority) in the eyes of their students, perhaps in large part due to the instructors’ institutional status.

How Institutional Structure Manifests

The status of the instructor in relation to her or his students is perhaps the most visible sign of institutional structure in a classroom. This hierarchical (often unspoken) authority model plays a major role in most classrooms whether instructors choose to embrace or resist it. How is this abstract, hierarchical model disseminated and maintained? As I have mentioned above, institutional practices shape individual classrooms in many ways—both direct and indirect. The institution invests instructors with the authority to determine the direction of a course, to set its policies, and to determine the success of each student in the class. The most obvious example of institutional influence is grading: at most institutions, instructors are required to accept the strict hierarchical relation of authority to students that comes with assigning course grades, whether or not that same hierarchy is (re)enacted in other aspects of their teaching.

But institutional practices constrain authority relationships in other ways, which are perhaps less unavoidable than the need to grade and be graded but may be just as pervasive.

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20 In this and following chapters, when I refer to information gathered during my study, I indicate the date and type of data (e.g., class notes, interview, email, etc.) along with the page number, if applicable.
21 After the first survey, the students’ perceptions of their instructors either dropped or remained relatively constant. More data from the surveys can be found in Appendix C.
because they are often not recognized. One such example from my study is the often taken for granted issue of institutionally-designed classroom architecture—the division of physical space in the room. DW's classroom was set up with rectangular tables bolted down in two horseshoe patterns, one inside the other. A traditional teacher's desk sat at the front of the room in front of the chalkboard. Because there was very little room to move around the tables once the students were in the chairs, DW spent most of the semester behind the teacher's desk at the front of the room. DW made this decision out of expediency—it allowed him to quickly access the chalkboard, students would not be forced to constantly adjust their positions to let him pass, etc.—and was surprised when I pointed out to him that this traditional division of space (students sitting in desks facing an instructor at the front of the room) might also reinforce traditional notions of the instructor-student relationship. This example highlights how even the most aware instructors may be influenced in unrecognized ways by the institutional environment in which they are placed. In this instance, the classroom space the institution provided to DW made it easy for a traditional hierarchy to remain in place.22

Instructor's Role

The example above shows how the institution shapes authority relationships in individual classrooms, but it is important to acknowledge that the structure was manifested by DW's action. When instructors (re)enact or resist the instructor role defined by the institution, they become participants in creating and maintaining local authority relationships with students in the classroom. For example, in DW's view, the grader-function was an unavoidable aspect of his job; rather than trying to minimize or ignore this hierarchical aspect of his relationships with students, DW chose to embrace it. Following the semester, he discussed some of the choices he made when (re)enacting authority with his students:

And it's true, I don't encourage [students to call me by my first name]. And part of the reason for that is that I'm going to give them a grade at the end of the semester, and so we're not close, personal friends. And we wouldn't have gotten together for any other reason except they're paying tuition and I'm getting a salary to teach. And I like to be as approachable and accessible as

22 This claim that the layout of a particular space can signify something about the power relationships of those in that space is also discussed in Foucault's 1972 debate “On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists.” In that discussion, Foucault considers what is represented by the judge's table in a court setting (8-11).
possible and help them in class and by email and every other way, but there’s a distance there. And I’m aware of it. I create it, and I try to keep it. (DW interview 4/11/03 [p. 8])

And while DW’s question and answer format (described at the beginning of the chapter) gave each student the opportunity to speak as an expert to DW and the class, it simultaneously reinforced DW’s primary authority over the classroom, since he had the power to paraphrase students’ answers in ways that did not match the point made by the student. In addition, by calling on students randomly, he determined who would speak when on a particular topic.

Frida also tried to balance being approachable and non-hierarchical, while simultaneously stressing to the students that she maintained high expectations in the classroom and on written work. Describing the first day of class, Frida said that her goal was to clearly establish herself as an expert writer and instructor who has specific rules concerning attendance, participation, etc. and then immediately “soften that authority” by telling the students about her personal life and joking with them (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 1]). In an interview before the semester began, she addressed much the same issue as DW:

I also let them call me by my first name if they... feel comfortable. I let them establish what they want to call me, but I think I do that because of that whole thing where I want to establish this expertise on one hand but approachability on the other, so I say, “Ok, you call me whatever you want to, but in the end, I’m the one who’s giving you a grade, and I’m the one who’s telling you whether what you’re doing is what you need to do to get the grade that you want.” (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 7])

In conversations with me, the students acknowledged the active roles their instructors took in determining the structure of a class. Jill recognized that DW maintained personal distance between himself and the students while remaining approachable in terms of assistance with writing. She also noted that it was DW’s established discussion style that

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23 The importance of naming, which DW, Frida, and several of their students raised during the semester, highlights another often-ignored institutional practice that reinforces an instructor’s authority over students. Instructors have the ability to decide how they want to be named in the classroom, and allowing students to use first names has become a popular method for instructors to resist a strict hierarchical relationship in the classroom. But whatever an instructor decides to be called, the same control over how to be named is not usually extended to students.
made it possible for her to learn from other students rather than just from DW and the textbook (Jill interview 1/30/03 [p. 1, 2]). Donna, Vince, and Jen all credited Frida for the close-knit atmosphere of the class and their own willingness to challenge her (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 7]; Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4]). Implicit in the students’ comments is the idea that the classroom environment could have been very different had the instructors chosen different pedagogies and/or activities.

Students’ Role

Because institutional practices invest instructors with power, it is not surprising that I observed DW and Frida taking an active role to establish authority relationships with their students. By contrast, the authority granted to students by the institution (e.g., post-semester evaluation of instructors) is minimal. As I mentioned above, traditional institutional structures place students in a reduced role in relation to an instructor. However, if classroom authority is defined in part as asserting control over the functioning of the course, students do participate in authority constructions in both direct and indirect ways. It is possible for students to assert direct control over instructor-student relationships by openly challenging or disagreeing with the instructor. Such challenges did occur several times in my study, and later in the chapter, I will discuss those factors that seemed to enable students’ direct control of instructor-student relationships.

Most often, however, the students in my study asserted what I call indirect authority by responding to the instructors’ attempts to assert authority with subtle, behavioral support or resistance that affected the functioning of the classroom. The construction of a traditional instructor-student relationship requires that the students accept the power and knowledge of the instructor, which they demonstrate by coming to the class, following the instructions given by the instructor, completing the assignments given, etc. More subtly, the effective function of this relationship involves the students’ “playing along” with the activities and conversations initiated by the instructor. When students actively or passively refuse to engage in instructor-initiated activities (or participate only minimally), the activities may be unsuccessful and the otherwise, smooth functioning of the instructor-student authority relationship disrupted.
Robert Brooke has labeled this type of passive resistance from students “underlife,” (141) and most instructors have probably experienced this type of student behavior. While students sometimes engaged in passive resistance individually or in small groups, in my study the students several times used the tactic of underlife collectively by choosing not to participate in the instructor-initiated discussion or activity. In this way, the students’ silence seemed to be a tactic for asserting their authority in the instructor-student relationship in a way that minimized the risk to them as individuals. For example, midway through the semester, Frida returned a major assignment that groups had spent a hectic two weeks completing. Due to the poor packaging of the assignments—components not labeled, documents out of order, etc.—Frida had given the projects poor grades but gave the students the option to raise those grades by re-packaging the assignment and resubmitting it the following week. Although the students complained to each other that they were “tired” of the assignment and had too much other work to do, none of the groups openly voiced to Frida the concerns they made to their classmates and on the surveys—that they had not been aware packaging was a part of the assignment, that redoing the project put them behind on other work for the class, etc. What the class did do, however, was participate very little in class discussion and activities during that class period and in the days immediately following. Frida commented about this change in the class to me during a discussion after class: “On a one-to-one basis, these students are great, but as a group, they have a weird chemistry all of a sudden. They seemed to be doing great today in their [small-group] conversations about the documents, but as soon as I asked them to talk about what they found, they shut up” (Frida interview 11/7/02 [p. 1]). After the semester, Donna and Vince confirmed Frida’s perception that the class dynamic had changed: “I think [having the instructions returned] made it her against us where I don’t think I felt that before…. It seemed odd. Just maybe a tiny hint that I thought this class had more student unity than other classes I’ve been in before” (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 12, 22].

Because the institution traditionally places visible power in a classroom in the hands of the instructors, it may be easy to forget that both instructors and students participate in maintaining and altering a framework of classroom authority. Often, students’ role in maintaining a class dynamic is invisible until some kind of breakdown occurs, as in the
example from Frida’s class above. A different kind of breakdown occurred in DW’s class when a new student, Albert, joined the class at midterm. According to the pattern DW established with the students in the first week where the students were experts responding to his own and others’ genuine questions, he never told students their answers were wrong. If DW thought a student’s response might be off-track, he would rephrase what the student had said or ask another student the same question. The result was a class that focused on inclusion, which occasionally meant letting a “wrong” answer go by. Presumably, the students picked up on this pattern because after the second week of classes, I did not record any instances of students correcting or openly disagreeing with one another until the day Albert joined the class. Unaware of the ways in which the students and instructor in the class talked to one another, Albert interrupted DW’s paraphrase of a student’s response to say, “I disagree. I think that’s wrong.” His outburst was unusual enough in the context of the class that I and the majority of the students looked up at him from our notes, and after class, DW expressed concerns about Albert’s effect on the class:

> I was a little taken aback today when [Albert] broke in to disagree with Vikrant. It’s not really the way things work in our class; I try to create an atmosphere where people can say what they think without anyone correcting them. (DW interview 10/18/02 [p. 1])

This example demonstrates the important role the students played in how the class was run. DW had a plan in mind for the way discussion should proceed, but the success of that plan required the tacit cooperation of each student in the class. Now that I have demonstrated the ways that the institution, the instructor, and the students participated in the manifestation of institutional structure in a classroom, I discuss in more detail in the next sections what that structure made possible and how it constrained the instructors and students in my study.

**Benefits of Institutional Structure**

Theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Lawrence Grossberg have described discursive structures as productive as well as limiting. Grossberg, for example, argues that structures “[enable] practices and identifications and [empower] social individuals” (96). Such was the case with institutional structure and practices in the classes I observed. While

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24 Albert’s “disruptions” continued for 1-2 more days, but he soon caught on to the class’s style of conversation.
not everyone would consider the institutionally-defined hierarchical nature of the instructor-
student authority relationship ideal, that structure does enable a number of positive things to
occur, particularly at the start of a semester. Although each person has different specific
classroom experiences, both instructor and students operate within the same institutional
structure (and in the case of a senior-level course like technical communication, almost all
are familiar with the Iowa State University structure, specifically). I argue that having this
commonly perceived authority structure benefits both students and instructors. Students are
better able to identify the expectations facing them, so they can determine how to be
successful in the course, while instructors can quickly establish a unique framework for the
class, so the “work” of the course can begin.

A number of researchers have identified the challenges individuals face when they
begin participation in a new community of practice (Lave and Wenger; Wenger; Cole and
Engestrom). But the students and instructors in my study—and in the majority of classrooms
I have experienced—were able to focus on the content and work of the semester as early as
the first or second day of class rather than spending valuable time negotiating their positions
and roles in the classroom. I believe that the pervasiveness of institutional structure formed a
common base that allowed Frida, DW, and their students to move authority negotiation to the
background, so they could begin work more quickly.

For the instructors in my study, the result of the pervasiveness of institutional
structure is that students were more likely to accept or at least try the instructor’s approach to
the class, which allowed the instructors to use the institutional status granted them at the
beginning of the semester by the institution to enact classroom authority relationships that
did not always adhere to a traditional pattern. DW and Frida were both experienced and
thoughtful teachers. Without prompting, they articulated pedagogies for their classrooms
that critiqued teaching approaches that did not challenge the instructors’ power over students.
But as Foucault has argued, resistance to a system of power relations occurs within that
system (Archeology 46). So the methods available to Frida and DW for enacting their
pedagogies came from within the institutional structure they critiqued; as a result, DW and
Frida both resisted and benefited from institutionally-derived structures of authority.
For example, DW shared with me his goal “to be invisible” so that at the end of the semester, students would remember communication situations they faced and concepts they learned but not remember DW as the person who gave those concepts to them. DW’s goal in becoming “invisible” was to encourage students to make decisions based on their own assessment of a communication situation and the tools available to them rather than following arbitrary “rules” set out for them by an authority figure such as an instructor or textbook. A number of teaching methods DW employed helped him to achieve this goal. For example, he taught concepts from the course by examining actual texts that had been used in technical communication situations. He also employed the question and answer style discussion described in the narrative opening of this chapter, in which the same discipline-specific question was frequently asked of several different students. During the first day of class, he implemented this pattern and began laying the groundwork for the idea that students held disciplinary expertise that could benefit the rest of the class. Thus, he engaged students in dialogue like the following:

    DW: What types of factual information do people in the field of computer engineering convey and for what purpose?
    Charles: Information about types of software packaging...
    DW: ...like the wrapping?
    Charles: Sometimes it’s actual packaging, but other times it’s the coding, the underlying algorithms, and stuff.
    DW: [to Sandi] You’re from animal science. What in that statement was new information to you?... What’s an algorithm?
    Sandi: I have no idea.
    DW: See, that’s one of the ways that we use the communication of our discipline to express ourselves and that communication is meaningful in particular circumstances. (class notes 8/26/02 [p. 3])

Through the pattern DW developed, the students provided a variety of reasoned answers that belied the idea of universal rules for writing. In addition, this conversation pattern allowed DW to keep authority in the form of expertise from settling for too long on one person, especially himself. DW’s contributions to most conversations consisted of asking questions and rephrasing information presented by the students, which helped him achieve his pedagogical goals by reducing the chance that students would see him as The
Expert, dispensing rules that the students should apply to all situations. Through questions and answers, concepts about good communication could emerge spontaneously, and important issues were raised by the students rather than DW. It was DW's discursively granted authority that made it possible for him to structure the class in this way; it is unlikely that the students would have spontaneously generated this pattern of discussion.

Meanwhile, Frida wanted her class to be comfortable talking on a personal level while still working to the top of their potential (Frida interview 8/20/02). Frida often told me that when students began joking and even arguing with her, she knew she had been successful in creating an atmosphere where the students could assert some control over the class and begin building their own expertise (e.g., Frida interview 8/27/03 [p. 1]). For this reason, she spent much of the first day telling stories about her history, making jokes, and having the students introduce themselves (class notes 8/23/03 [p. 3]). During the first week and a half, she also frequently encouraged the students to assert authority in the way the semester was run, telling the students on the first day: "If you look ahead and see an assignment that doesn't look relevant, come talk to me about it, and we can decide whether to remove it from the syllabus" (class notes 9/27/02 [p. 3]). In addition, she spoke frequently about changes that had occurred in past classes when the students were willing to assert authority in the class, and during the second week, she suggested the students propose changes to the homework and quizzes for the course (Frida email to class 9/1/02). Once students did suggest changes and discuss them as a class, Frida implemented them.

Altering traditional, hierarchical instructor-student authority relationships may be a particular goal in technical communication courses where one of the (implied or stated) goals of the course is often to facilitate the process of professionalization for students preparing to begin careers outside of academia. The authority granted an instructor by the institution may make it easier for her or him to create classroom environments that, in part, emulate other authority relationships, such as those of the workplace. My own course policies, for example, emulate the language of business—instead of writing about excused and unexcused absences, I offer students a set number of "vacation and sick days," telling students that it is their responsibility to manage those days responsibly. This alters our relationship of authority because I am no longer in the position of judging for students the validity of their
excuses; instead they assume management over their own performance. Similarly, Frida told the students that her tardy policy was not important in the context of the class but because of the importance of being on time in a professional job. She supported this claim with statistics stating that the number one reason new employees are fired is because they are habitually late (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 4]).

For Frida, DW, and their students, therefore, the shared structure of institutionally defined roles made it possible to quickly begin the work of the semester, focusing on course material rather than taking valuable time becoming acclimated to their roles within the classroom. For the instructors, in particular, the comfort of institutionally-defined roles at the beginning of the semester paradoxically made it easier to enact more complicated authority relationships with students because students’ understanding of their institutionally-defined role seemed to make them willing to at least try the instructors’ approaches. I argue that it was because of the pervasiveness of the institutional structure that the classes were able to enjoy these benefits; at the same time, however, the structure constrained possible manifestations of authority in both classrooms.

Constraints of Institutional Structure

The examples above suggest that institutional practices facilitate the quick establishment of classroom authority relationships. However, these same structures and practices constrain the possible manifestations of those relationships; the individuals in DW and Frida’s classrooms simultaneously enacted alternative authority relationships/classroom pedagogies and operated within traditional conceptions of instructor-student relationships.

Constraints for Instructors

Altering relationships of authority does not mean that they are no longer shaped by institutional structures. The institutional practices that place an instructor in authority over the students continue to demand that the instructor judge the success of students and provide a direction for the class. As a result, authority relationships in classrooms become complicated. Anthony Giddens describes this complicated relationship when he argues that structures are “always both constraining and enabling” (25). Those instructors who do choose to resist a traditional authority relationship may find that while they can indeed
complicate the ways authority is enacted in their classrooms, the structures of the institution remain influential, creating a “doubleness” in which the instructor simultaneously (re)enacts and resists traditional authority relationships. Such was the case with both of the instructors in my study. In both of the examples discussed in the previous section, the instructors remained bound to their hierarchical position of power despite their efforts to alter them. As I mentioned above, DW’s question-and-answer format reinforced his position as the person with the authority to determine who would speak and on what topic, even while it offered students the opportunity to express discipline-specific expertise.

One source of constraint on the instructors in my study was the students themselves. A traditional concept of authority might portray the individual with greater authority (here, the instructors) constraining those with less authority (the students) who struggle to take back authority for themselves (e.g., Freire; de Certeau). Interactions in both classes, however, were marked by students actively trying to keep the instructors in traditional positions of authority. In survey and interview responses, the students expressed expectations of DW or Frida that seemed to adhere to traditional instructor-student authority relationships. One student wrote on the first survey that an instructor’s role in the classroom is to “provide an environment that involves being specific and direct when it comes to what they want the students to obtain in the class.”

And when Frida changed the syllabus in an attempt to reflect the students’ needs and requests, students responded by calling for greater consistency and stability in the course. Donna and Vince also stated after the semester that they wished Frida would have stepped in and managed the student-student interactions in small groups by either changing the group participants or disciplining those students who did not participate fully (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 5-6]). Throughout my interactions with the students, they expressed this contradictory desire for the class. Jen, for example, expressed her idea of an ideal instructor as follows:

I need somebody who has knowledge and somebody who doesn’t treat her students as children. Somebody who doesn’t spoon-feed me, but somebody who realizes I’m an adult…. I need somebody who will just say, “this is what you need to know,” and will guide me to getting it, but not say, “Read this, and then do this.” (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 1])

25 Other students expressed similar “ideal roles” for instructors that focused on direct guidance. For a list of students’ responses to the question about instructors’ classroom roles, see the survey data in Appendix C.
Why might students simultaneously want an instructor who allows students to assert authority and tells them exactly what is expected? Most of the students in my study—juniors and seniors experienced with college-level interactions between students and instructors—had previous classroom experiences that led them to expect an instructor to have greater right and responsibility in the classroom to determine the direction of the course on a day-to-day basis. So while Frida or DW may have wanted to resist traditional instructor-student authority relationships, the students still perceived the instructors’ actions through that lens. In addition, students in both classes claimed that knowing exactly what the instructor wanted would save them considerable time in terms of completing assignments, so while Frida and DW saw long-term dangers in providing too much guidance for addressing communication situations, the students viewed the short-term benefits to themselves (e.g., higher assignment and semester grades, more time for other work) of having those guidelines. One student from Frida’s class spoke to this point in an email interview after the semester:

I think the biggest weakness of our class was that we didn’t focus on the teaching BEHIND the class as much. ...It seemed like very few people in the class actually cared about learning principles in technical communication. Everyone just wanted to get a good grade and wanted the class to be over. As students, we should have wanted to get the most out of our money and education. We should have worked harder at actually learning the stuff. Instead, we just tried to figure out what [Frida]... wanted and we did that to get a good grade. (Madison email interview 2/9/03)

The idea that students might benefit from more traditional approaches to authority in the classroom has been supported in other studies where instructors trying to “decenter” their authority encountered resistance and dissatisfaction from students. For example Carol Delitiner describes the discomfort many students felt in a course where curricular issues were negotiated between the instructor and students. Similarly, David Wallace and Helen Ewald argue that instructors interested in creating classrooms where knowledge is developed between instructors and students must realize that some students will resist such approaches because traditional types of instructor control have helped students be successful in the past (14).
In my study, both resistance from students and the continuing constraints of institutional structure acted to keep the instructors in positions of authority even when the instructors made efforts to alter those relationships. But institutional structure did not always support the authority of the instructors in my study. In the next section, I discuss some ways that the instructors' particular university status impacted their authority relationships with students.

Constraints for Lecturers

I have discussed above some of the constraints that DW and Frida faced as classroom instructors, but the institutional structures of universities are rarely as simple as instructor and student. Most universities have several gradations of "instructor," which can have tangible, although often unacknowledged, effects on individual classrooms. Eileen Schell claims that part-time instructors receive little financial or professional support from their institutions, frequently working for "salaries that rival those of underpaid waitresses" (80). Wallace and Ewald argue that "the academic underclass of limited-term employees" might find it difficult—or even dangerous—to enact alternative pedagogies and relationships of authority with their students due to constraints on their resources (including time) and the uncertainty of their continued employment (25-6). These institutional factors impacted the classrooms of both DW and Frida who were lecturers on semester contracts during the semester I observed them. Lecturers at Iowa State are temporary faculty who teach three to four courses per semester and are paid by the course (as opposed to tenure-track faculty, who typically teach two courses per semester and are salaried). English department lecturers are not required to serve on departmental committees (although many do); however, as a condition of their continued employment, they must participate in professional development activities throughout the year. While it is not possible in this dissertation to compare DW and Frida's classes specifically to technical communication classes taught by graduate students or tenured faculty, it was clear to me that in the two sections I observed that their institutional status as lecturers did affect what DW and Frida were able to do and also how they perceived what they could and should do.

Although DW was a well-informed teacher/scholar who devoted himself to his classes on both theoretical and practical levels, his status as lecturer teaching 75 students in
writing intensive courses prevented him from implementing changes he believed would make the class stronger. Often DW had to choose between crucial professional development (reading articles, attending campus pedagogy seminars) and the day-to-day management of his classroom (preparing assignments, grading, etc). During the middle portion of the semester, there was some doubt whether DW would be assigned teaching again in the spring (many lecturers at Iowa State are assigned work on a semester-by-semester basis, and lecturers may not know what or if they are teaching until weeks before the beginning of a semester). During this time, DW was focused on researching teaching positions at other schools and sending out application packets. Not surprisingly, the application process took time that he would have otherwise devoted to teaching preparation and grading.

In another example, during the fall 2002 semester, DW developed further his theory that technical writing can best be understood as techné. He believed that there were approaches he could take with future classes that would introduce technical communication as techné and made plans to alter his course for the spring semester. In addition, he decided that using WebCT would enable him to do more one-on-one work with students via email, which would help him to better achieve his goals for the class. DW was prevented from implementing these plans during the spring semester when he took the opportunity to teach an overload, important because lecturers are paid by the course. With four classes, including three different preps, the three weeks of winter break were not enough time to make significant changes to his technical communication syllabus.

Frida’s status as a lecturer also influenced her authority relationship with the students in her class. As a single woman who owns her own home, the low pay provided to lecturers and the uncertainty of future employment, combined with a recent promotion at work, made it necessary for her to continue working at Midwest Trust (a large, Midwestern banking firm 45 minutes from Iowa State) while teaching courses. To manage teaching in one city and working in another, Frida taught her three courses and held her office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 8 a.m.–2 p.m. She spent evenings and the rest of her days during the week at Midwest Trust. This meant that although Frida went to great lengths to be accessible via email at anytime during the week, she could usually only be available to meet face-to-face with individual students 3-4 hours per week. When Frida wanted to schedule individual
conferences, which she believed to be pedagogically important, she had to cancel a week of classes and limit each conference strictly to 15 minutes to accommodate all 75 students. In the conferences I observed, Frida successfully navigated the students through several topics related to the class and gave them substantial feedback on their work that would help them to revise, but she did not have time for much one-on-one conversation about the students’ semester and work outside of English 314, which she enjoyed discussing with students.

The influence of academic status was an invisible player in both classrooms as well as in the planning of the course. Although students did not mention DW’s status as a lecturer during the semester or in interviews with me—some may not have even been aware that he was a lecturer—the time constraints that resulted did affect the class. One of the very few complaints students expressed about the class was that graded work was returned late in the semester, and they did not have a sense of how they were doing in the class or what adjustments to make on future assignments. In Frida’s class, the students were even more aware that her time was divided between teaching and technical writing, although some of them might not have known that her status as lecturer was a primary cause for this division. On several occasions, students commented that Frida’s divided time constrained their class in some ways. In an interview after the semester, Donna said:

She was working 50 hours a week at her one job, she was teaching three sections here at the university, plus she had a daughter, she was painting her house on the side. I don’t even know all the things she did, but I just felt like she was spread too thin. She did much better than I could do in that situation, but still, we didn’t receive what we were expecting. I didn’t feel like she was able to give 100% to our class like I maybe would have hoped. (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 3])

However, the same students who commented on her lack of time acknowledged the benefits the class received from having an instructor who was also working in the business sector. Minutes later in the same interview, Donna agreed with Vince when he said:

I was very amazed at how much she was balancing. But I think I took [her lack of time] as kind of a trade-off for having someone who was out in industry. Because it doesn’t seem like it happens very much, at least with my background with professors at Iowa State. Someone who can actually tell me

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26 DW does not hide this information from students. In another English 314 section during the same semester, the students asked him about faculty salaries in a conversation about proposed university tuition hikes, and he discussed the differences between tenure and non-tenure faculty.
this is how it’s done—I really liked that. So I guess I kind of took that in stride. This is the price to pay with someone who’s actually out there doing it, and they’re kind of juggling things themselves. (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 3-4])

A second constraint on Frida’s class that I believe was a direct result of her status as a lecturer is that her class was “displaced” twice at the beginning of the semester by tenured faculty from other departments. As a result, the class met in five different locations during the first four weeks of the semester, including one class period in a dry fountain bed in the courtyard of the Food Science building. The class was finally given a room in a building undergoing renovation; the sounds of construction were frequently loud enough to drown out discussion, and the sight of materials being thrown from the roof past the windows often disrupted class time. After the semester, several students cited the resulting uncertainty as a major challenge to the class, claiming either that the frequent movement made the class seem disorganized or that it took away much needed time for addressing the course topics.

The specific institutional status lecturers inhabit has been the subject of several articles and conference resolutions in composition and professional communication (e.g., Robertson, et al.; Gappa and Leslie; Cayton; McConnel; “Statement from the MLA...”) because colleges and universities frequently employ part-time faculty to teach service writing courses. DW and Frida’s experiences demonstrate two ways lecturers might choose to adapt to their institutional (and economic) status and how this status might impact technical communication classrooms. On the one hand, in technical communication, in particular, students may benefit from working with instructors like Frida, whose status as lecturer allow them to straddle the line between academic and industry work, bringing recent, relevant experience to bear on the classroom. At the same time, although a stated goal of many lecturer positions is to focus on teaching (as opposed to research or service), the precarious position and financial constraints of many of these jobs can force lecturers to reduce the time spent with students and on class preparation.

Constraints for Students

If students participated in constraining instructors within the structures of institutional status, they were certainly constrained by those structures as well. Students assume greater
risk than instructors in terms of their academic success in attempting to alter their authority relationships with instructors. Students in technical communication classes are typically juniors and seniors, many in rigorous majors. Reaching this advanced stage toward the degree requires significant effort and investment (in time, finances, etc.), and most have had prior success negotiating classroom settings. And because institutional practices place the weight of power in the instructors' hands, students may believe they are risking their "investment" if they assert authority over a course and/or the instructor.

I observed a large number of instances in both classes when the students demonstrated unwillingness or reluctance to assume authority in their relationships with DW or Frida. In DW's class, the students rarely challenged decisions DW made for the course. For example, his use of the index cards to determine who would speak made so many students in the class "anxious," that it was the biggest concern expressed by the class during their external evaluation at the end of the first month. But rather than tell DW that they did not like the cards, they revealed their concerns only when encouraged by an outside evaluator to discuss those parts of DW's class that they did not like. And in the example of the instructions assignment (discussed on page 66) that Frida gave students the option to revise and resubmit, students complained to one another, but all six groups revised the project and acknowledged to Frida when resubmitting that they had learned a lot through the revision process. None of the groups asserted authority by not completing the assignment or by telling Frida their complaint that they were not aware of the requirement or that they would not have adequate time to complete later projects. In this instance, the students seemed to feel unsure enough about their position in the class and about the potential impact that protest might have on their grades that the risk of refusing to do the assignment and/or voicing their concerns about it appeared too great.

27 The university's Center for Teaching Excellence provides single class session evaluations early in the semester at the request of the instructor. Following the evaluation session—which the course instructor is not permitted to attend—the evaluator provides the instructor with a summary of what the class likes and dislikes about the course. The CTE representative told DW that the largest number of concerns stemmed from the use of the 3x5 cards. Not all of the students disliked the 3x5 cards, however. In an interview with me after the semester, one of the students told me, "I liked that he went through the index cards and went around because you always got to hear from everyone.... And I think it would almost make some people more comfortable because you know you're going to get called on. You're just going to have to talk. It's not like you have to raise your hand" (Jill interview [p. 2]).
But in both classes, there were several occasions when students did assert authority within the classroom. If we acknowledge the constraints facing students in going against institutional tradition in this way, what could motivate them to take such a risk and assert authority over the course and/or instructor? In my study, two conditions seemed to facilitate the students’ assumption of authority.

First, students tended to assert direct authority over the class if they were explicitly encouraged by an institutionally recognized authority to do so. In my study, there were several occasions when the students were encouraged by DW, Frida, or another recognized authority in the room to assert control over some aspect of the course or course material. In DW’s class, for example, the majority of the students felt encouraged enough by DW to claim disciplinary expertise about technical communication (this idea of disciplinary expertise will be discussed in greater detail in the second half of the chapter). Similarly, once the evaluator—endorsed by the university and invited by DW—asked the students for specific criticisms of the course, the students voiced their concerns about DW’s use of index cards to determine who would be called on to speak.

In Frida’s class, the students attempted early in the semester to assert authority over the course structure. During the second week, the students reacted strongly against being assigned both homework exercises and quizzes. In email and class discussion, several students offered opinions of how the course should be altered, including some direct (and passionate) criticisms about decisions Frida had made for the course. Two examples come from the in-class conversation:

I don’t mind quizzes, but I think making us do homework just to make us read is ridiculous.... I think you underestimate your classes.

The exercises in the book are kind of dumb. Mostly, we have to find documents around our house to bring in. It’s like kiddie show and tell. (class notes 9/3/03 [p. 2,3])

When I traced back the genesis of the conversation, I discovered that Frida had raised the issue herself in an email, encouraging the students to offer their opinions on whether the homework exercises were useful in preparation for a class-wide decision. During the conversation in which students complained about the assignment, Frida facilitated the dialogue, allowing each student who wanted to speak to have an opportunity to make her or
his points. Following the conversation and a class vote, Frida eliminated the homework exercises. At no point in the conversation did she seem angry or defensive, and after class, she told me that she appreciated that the students felt comfortable enough with her to be honest. Had Frida not raised the topic of homework exercises, the students may not have voiced their concerns until much later in the semester, if at all. More importantly, had she not demonstrated receptivity to the arguments the students were making, there likely would have been fewer and less honest comments from the class.28

A second condition that prompted students to assert authority in contrast to institutional norms was when the risk of speaking out (i.e., doing so could affect the final grade) was surpassed in the students' minds by some other threat (to their time, their success in the course, their way of thinking, etc.) that could only be remedied by asserting authority in relation to the instructor. For example, early in the semester, Nancy had to miss three days of DW's class, which according to the policies of his syllabus could have lowered her grade. Because the trip was for an academic conference, DW agreed to excuse the absence if Nancy wrote 500 words on communication at the conference for each day she missed class. Nancy agreed to the stipulation but upon returning from the conference, she was not able to complete the assignment. After asking for a one-class period extension, Nancy came to the next class and talked to DW:

I have a question. How much is that 1500 word assignment worth? I don't have time to do it because I have classes. And since I made up the [in-class] work, which you didn't ask me to do, can I just submit a summary?.... It says on the course policy sheet that three absences will affect my grade. Could the summary make up for one day or something? (class notes 9/18/02 [p. 3])

In Nancy's case, the time commitments placed on her by DW's policies were great enough that they overrode her concerns about failing to complete work requested by an instructor. By asserting authority over her requirements in the course, Nancy was able to receive partial credit for the work she had done while still preserving her own time.

28 Acknowledging Frida's role in facilitating students' authority over the course does not, however, negate the assertions of authority students were making in their comments. This is evidenced by the fact that there were a few students who seemed hesitant to declare a clear preference despite Frida's encouragement. Even more important, the quotes above show students going beyond the original question, "Do you prefer homework or quizzes?" to make claims about their abilities, the ways they prefer to be treated in a class, and the quality of the textbook.
As I have demonstrated, authority relationships between instructors and students may be heavily influenced by the institutional structure and practices that place them in hierarchical positions to one another. As instructors and students (re)enact or resist the traditional power structures of such relationships, they continue to negotiate their authority toward one another throughout the semester. But institutional structure is not the only discourse influencing a class, or we would not see such significant differences in the manifestation of different authority relationships. A second structure particularly relevant to upper-level, multi-discipline courses such as technical communication is disciplinary expertise and its relative valuing by members of the class and the institution. In the next section, I look at the ways that expertise acted as a second—and sometimes, contradictory—structure constraining and enabling authority relationships in the two classrooms I studied.

**INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT EXPERTISE-BASED AUTHORITY**

While institutional structures and practices place instructors in positions of power over students, the structure of disciplinary expertise also plays a role in the manifestation of instructor-student authority relationships. By “expertise,” I refer to the professional and academic experiences each individual uses to construct knowledge and assert authority. What I call “expertise” is similar to the concept Wallace and Ewald call “interpretive agency”—“bringing one’s prior experience to bear in the construction of knowledge” (16)—although I focus on those types of experience related to professional disciplines, while Wallace and Ewald include other types of personal experience. The structure of expertise is tied to institutional structure; in courses within students’ majors, for example, an instructor typically has greater expertise than the student, which can reinforce and maintain the hierarchical nature of authority. Similarly, in first-year composition most of the students have not yet developed extensive disciplinary expertise, so the instructor acts as a sort of expert initiating students into the discourse of the institution as a whole. In technical communication, however, the relationship between institutional structure and expertise is not always complementary for two reasons. First, the multi-disciplinary nature of technical communication increases the likelihood that students will have relevant expertise that lies outside the realm of the instructor’s knowledge, which contradicts the traditional institutional structure that assumes instructors hold knowledge and students receive it. Second, implicit
messages from the institution concerning the relative value of various types of expertise may contradict the instructor-student hierarchy in some classes. As a result, instructors in rhetorically-based courses such as technical communication may find the students in their classes have been taught to value the expertise of their own disciplines over that of the instructors.

The importance of expertise in technical communication classes should not be surprising given the distinct position the course typically occupies within higher education institutions. At Iowa State, for example, English 314 is a required class for many students majoring in engineering, computer science, and agriculture. Due to heavy demand for the course, students typically do not take English 314 until their senior year—often in the final semester before graduation. Because the students are nearing the end of their programs, English 314 may be one of the few required courses outside of their majors that students have taken in several semesters. Within the technical communication classroom, the students, most of whom are about to begin their professional careers, may be the only or one of the only representatives from their fields. The instructors, meanwhile, have different types of expertise than their students (most technical communication majors enroll in a single specific section of the course reserved for English majors). Unlike courses in their majors, where students typically find themselves "communicating to...the expert who knows more than they do" (Norgaard 53), the different forms of expertise in technical communication create the opportunity for individual students to function as experts from their disciplines. This type of student expertise contradicts traditional institutional structure, which assumes the locus of knowledge rests with the instructor; as a result the balance of power in instructor-student authority relationships may be altered.

In addition, an institution's structures and practices may officially or unofficially support particular beliefs about the relative value of different disciplines and forms of expertise. These beliefs may in turn impact relationships of authority between technical communication instructors and their students from science and technical fields. Foucault argues that disciplinary boundaries are arbitrary and are maintained, in large part, by affirming and rejecting what a discipline is not (Archaeology 22-23). Similarly, in an article on negotiating expertise in engineering-focused technical communication courses, Rolf
Norgaard writes that "expertise has its political and economic dimensions" that may impact the way courses and instructors are valued by the institution (45). Engineering, for example, has traditionally been highly valued, in part because "professionally certifiable engineering expertise" is licensed at the undergraduate level, unlike other professional experts in fields such as science, medicine, and law (44). Technical communication, on the other hand, has not enjoyed the same regard, in part, because it has often been viewed not as an expertise, but as a "competency" (46). Professional communication scholarship has addressed the ways in which technical communicators in the workplace have been viewed as "scribes" or "secretaries" by those they work with (e.g., Doheny-Farina; Dragga; Carolyn Miller; Winsor). For example, Jennifer Daryl Slack, et al., note that technical communicators in the workplace have often been considered transmitters or translators of information rather than authors, simply passing on the information generated by scientists and engineers (13). In an article describing a client-based project involving engineering and technical communication students, Patricia Wojahn, et al. demonstrate that unequal valuing of different disciplines occurs within universities, as well.

The instructors and students in my study encountered at least some disparity in terms of what types of knowledge are valued. At Iowa State University, the institution places greater relative value—in terms of economic support and publicity—on majors within its engineering college than on humanities disciplines within the college of liberal arts and sciences, including technical communication courses (taught by the English department). In addition, technical communication is considered a "service" course by the institution, with 45 to 50 sections taught each year, the vast majority staffed by graduate students and temporary instructors and often without a secure source of funding. On several occasions, DW and Frida discussed how this institutional perception of technical communication influenced their classrooms. For example, DW said...
It's interesting to see that people who don’t work with writing regularly seem to have this idea that writing is a concept rather than a skill that develops over time. There's an idea that anybody can do this if they just sit down and work at it for awhile. There's a sense that there's not really expertise that people who teach writing bring into the classroom. It's a case of “everybody knows how to do this.” (DW interview 4/11/03 [p. 3])

DW's characterization of the ways those in science and technical fields perceive technical communication was supported by some students' perceptions of the course material. Charles said that the material DW covered was a “good reminder” of information he had studied in the past (Charles email interview 2/11/03). Madison and Jen claimed that the majority of concepts covered by Frida were “common sense” and “kind of obvious,” respectively (Madison email interview 2/9/03; Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 10]). At the same time, other students believed that the information they had learned during the semester was significant and at the end of the semester could already point to ways they had used or were planning to use their new technical communication skills (e.g., Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 14]; Jill post-interview 1/30/03 [p. 4]; Nancy email interview 3/5/03).

When an instructor's institutional status is not supported by the students' and/or the institution's perceptions of the relative value of the instructor's expertise, the instructor may react in one of several ways. On the one hand, technical communication instructors (and possibly some students) might try to maintain the traditional relationship of authority supported by institutional status that may otherwise be undermined by students' views of disciplinary expertise (and/or other discursive structures such as gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.). During Iowa State's 2003 summer workshop for technical and business communication instructors, for example, one panel discussion (requested by instructors with several years of teaching experience) was devoted to authority issues, primarily how to get students to accept an instructor's authority. The perceived need for a workshop like this is due, I believe, to the conflicting messages about expertise-based authority that students and instructors receive.

On the other hand, instructors and students might use the contradictory discursive structures to complicate relationships of authority in their own classrooms. Catherine Fox has argued that dominant discourses (similar to what I have called institutional structures and practices) do not result in fixed and finalized dichotomies of power but are instead negotiated
continuously (382). Such was the case with the participants in my study who were both enabled and constrained by the discursive structure of academic and professional expertise. Frida negotiated expertise with her students in complicated ways, including making assertions about her own expertise while at the same time encouraging the students to assert their own expertise over the class. DW, meanwhile, tried to avoid making assertions of his own academic or professional expertise but was unable to completely escape the role of "instructor as expert" in the classroom. A crucial component of these authority relationships was how the different types of expertise were expressed and received by the participants.

**Expertise-Based Authority in Frida’s Class**

Within the context of her class, Frida worked hard to establish for the students her own expertise and its relevance to their professional success. At the same time, she tried to complicate the traditional instructor-student relationship in two ways: first, she encouraged the students to think of their own communication experiences in internships and their courses as the basis for making expert claims about technical communication. Second, she disrupted her discourse about her own expertise by providing examples of her own communication “mistakes.” Invoking expertise in the classroom allowed Frida and the students to negotiate their authority relationship throughout the semester.

From Frida’s perspective, her expertise stemmed from the fact that she worked full-time as a technical communicator and was familiar with corporate culture; while she ranked her teaching experience as important in terms of her ability to convey information, she did not believe that teaching experience alone was enough to qualify her to teach technical communication. In part, Frida’s (and DW’s, as I will show later) perceptions of her own expertise stemmed from her beliefs about the nature of knowledge itself. In discussion with me before the semester, Frida claimed that extensive, practical experience was more valuable for technical communication instructors than academic experience:

The main thing I find I have to do first is establish my authority as an expert in this area. I can’t imagine teaching this class without working in industry because that establishes immediately with them that I do know what I’m talking about. That I’m not an academician but a practitioner who’s going to come into the classroom and share with them MY experience from industry, and that is what’s going to help them. (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 1])
To establish her authority, Frida spent 10 minutes of the first class period describing her educational and professional experience, detailing briefly the companies she had worked for, positions she had held, and the projects she was currently working on. As the semester continued, Frida typically brought in examples of her own experience several times during a class period. On several occasions, she brought sample documents from her current job.

Frida’s belief that students would value her workplace experience was supported by many of their comments at the end of the semester. Although none of the students mentioned the importance of industry-based experience when I asked them to describe their ideal instructor at the beginning of the semester (see Appendix B, survey #1), in their final surveys and during interviews following the semester, several students discussed Frida’s work-based expertise. One student identified “the fact that [Frida] had over 20 years experience with technical writing” as the most significant factor shaping his judgment of Frida as competent and credible (see Appendix B, survey #4). In interviews, other students also discussed the impact of Frida’s expertise on their perceptions of her:

Donna: I always like life experience, where they’ve tried something out and they know, instead of just saying “I have all this knowledge from a book.” Instead they have actually applied the knowledge and been there, done that. Which I definitely think Frida had.

Vince: I agree. That gave me a lot of respect for Frida. Just being able to tell us what she’s done in the past. I have much more respect for professors who can tell me, “I’ve been out in industry for 16 years”…. It feels like I’ll be able to learn more from them. I’ll be able to get more out of the class coming from the point of view of someone who knows what it’s like in a professional way, not only theory. (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 3])

In the context of the classroom, Frida seemed to assert her expertise primarily for two reasons: (1) to help the students learn important communication concepts and (2) to reassert her own authority in the classroom. The first reason Frida went to great lengths to establish her expertise was that she believed doing so would help the students learn valuable workplace communication skills. Frida regularly used examples from her own experience working for Midwest Trust, a large banking corporation, to demonstrate concepts in technical communication because she believed that the knowledge she gained there was in some way generalizable to the students’ experiences:
Every business situation isn’t completely unique. There are common threads. I’ve brought up enough issues through the textbook and through my own experiences, and the students have been able to correlate that to their own experiences. That means the real-world is following some patterns. Yes, every situation is unique—the particulars of who is involved, the language that was used, how it was interpreted, or how it violates company policy—but there are some basic things that the kids aren’t learning from academicians that they need to learn before they get into the workplace. (Frida interview 9/30/02 [p. 10])

Frida’s belief that students would be able to generalize from her experiences seemed again to be supported by students’ post-semester comments about specific concepts they learned as a result of Frida’s examples. The same student who wrote on his final survey that Frida’s experience in technical writing was the most significant factor in the course went on to say that as a result “[his] technical writing skills have drastically improved over the course of the semester.” Other examples include:

Sam: Her examples gave me some better technical communication skills. I became aware of important issues, like emails in the workplace (assume everyone is going to read them). (Sam email interview 2/11/03)

Jen: I remember one time she was using her position at Midwest Trust when she went in as an editor to explain one of the diagrams on the website that she had us look at. That I really appreciated because that diagram was just awful. (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 5])

In addition to using her expertise as a teaching tool for the students, Frida asserted her expertise to reaffirm her classroom authority on occasions when students seemed to dismiss the value or usefulness of technical communication ability. While students might not perceive that rejecting technical communication’s value is the same as questioning the instructor’s authority, Frida believed her authority as an instructor was inextricably connected to the type of expertise she held: “You have to be effective on the basis of what it is you’re teaching, not because you’re the teacher and that alone” (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 8]). Prior to the semester, therefore, Frida explained that one of the reasons she tried to establish her expertise immediately is that many students do not accept the value of learning technical communication skills:
A lot of times the students I’ve had in the classroom have said, “I don’t need writing. I’ll just get a secretary. I won’t have to bother with this stuff.” And so with this level class, my first job, I think, is to establish that they do need these skills, and the way I convince them of that is by convincing them that “I’m doing it. I’m making a living doing it, and I can tell you stories about industry and how this is going to relate to your career.” (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 1])

Frida’s statement indicates the extent to which her assertions of expertise were an attempt to preemptively address what she saw as students’ devaluation of technical communication expertise, a view most likely stemming from institutional discourse about the relative value of disciplines such as engineering and technical communication. On the first day, for example, Frida told the class, “I charge $65 an hour to my clients. You get the benefit of my services free for three months!” (class notes 8/27/02 [p. 3]). Throughout the semester when students disagreed with the usefulness of technical communication assignments or concepts, Frida used examples from her own experience demonstrating the importance of such information. It is interesting to note, furthermore, that Frida felt compelled to “convince” students of her expertise and to stress its value to them in these ways. This may stem from her perception that some students did not automatically accept technical communication skills as valuable and/or as a form of expertise (a view supported by some statements from students on page 84).30

While Frida did want the students to accept her expertise-based authority, at the same time, she wanted the students to view themselves as emerging communication experts who did have valuable information to contribute to the class. She encouraged students to use their academic and professional experiences as the basis for making communication decisions. During the first week of class, she asked the students who had held internships and co-ops to discuss the types of writing they had done (class notes 9/27/02) and then had the class bring in technical documents from their fields and discuss the features unique to their disciplines (class notes 9/29/02). As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Frida also encouraged the

30 Like Frida, students in both classes also made explicit statements of their professional and academic expertise in support of their claims, frequently prefacing their responses with statements such as “In Community and Regional Planning, we...” or “When I worked for the phone company...”. I believe these explicit claims seemed necessary because students could not assume that their answers would be accepted on the basis of their position in the classroom. I discuss students use of disciplinary expertise claims in more detail in Chapter 5.
students to assert authority over the management of the course; this encouragement was sometimes based on their expertise: “You know your fields. If this class doesn’t relate to what you’re going to be doing at work, then I’m doing you a disservice. If you look ahead and see an assignment that doesn’t look relevant, come talk to me about it, and we can decide whether to remove it from the syllabus” (class notes 9/27/02 [p. 3]).

In addition to encouraging students to share their own professional experiences and offering them some control over the way the course was run, Frida disrupted hierarchical relationships of authority by offering “negative” personal examples—times when her own communication attempts failed. These examples served as a sort of anti-expertise, contradicting the idea that the instructor holds all the answers. For Frida, these examples were useful because they let the students see that she was not perfect and did not expect them to be either (Frida interview 9/30/02 [p. 8]); in addition, Frida was able to raise important technical communication concepts while complicating her own expertise-based authority. For example, early in the semester, she stressed the importance of not saying anything in emails that should not be read by a wide audience by describing a time when she accidentally sent information that was intended for just one person to an entire email list (class notes 9/10/02 [p. 5]).

As students became more used to Frida’s use of negative personal examples, they were more likely to challenge her, thereby altering the instructor-student authority relationships in the class. For example, in the quote below in which Frida described a communication failure that occurred in one of her classes the previous year when she was trying to buy a house, Bob pointed out what he saw as a contradiction in her claims once Frida called her own expertise/knowledge into question:

Frida: I’d just had a really bad experience the day before, and I was talking to my 314 class and said that “realtors were the lowest form of life on earth.” I didn’t realize one of the student’s father was a realtor, and she took great offense. I apologized, but she never did forgive me.

Bob: Didn’t you learn a lesson? Last week, you said car salesmen were the lowest form of life.

Frida: [laughs] Some of us have to screw up a few times before we learn. (class notes 9/12/02 [p. 25])
Although the above example dealt with a casual statement Frida had made rather than a claim for technical expertise, its occurrence early in the semester and Frida’s response to Bob—a laugh rather than anger—set the stage for students to question claims made by Frida and the textbook throughout the first half of the semester. This exchange was an important occurrence in the class for Frida, who told me on the first day of class that she deliberately tried to establish a classroom environment where students could be honest with her and even disagree with her so that they could begin asserting authority of their own (Frida interview 8/27/02 [p. 1]).

Throughout the semester, Frida was able to draw on the discursive structure of expertise in her classroom to both embrace and resist the related structure of institutional status. First, her extensive industry-based expertise and the students’ willingness to accept that type of expertise as valuable as they prepared to enter the workforce themselves supported and reinforced the traditional, hierarchical institutional structure of instructor-student authority. Frida did value holding an authoritative position in the classroom, and she was able to present her expertise in terms that the students usually found persuasive. At the same time, however, she used the multi-disciplinary nature of the classroom and negative personal examples to complicate this authority, so students could begin thinking about their own authority and expertise in their fields and, specifically, in their professional communication.

**Expertise-Based Authority in DW’s Class**

Unlike Frida, DW believed that most knowledge and expertise is not generalizable beyond a particular context. Instead, he wanted students to develop a broad understanding of general and discipline-specific communication concepts and the research supporting those concepts and then to apply those concepts to the needs of a particular communication situation. For this reason, he did not value expressions of his own expertise as a method for asserting authority. More importantly, he discouraged students from making decisions based on “rules” he had given them. In discussion with me, he claimed “I’m trying to shift them from ‘my teacher says this is the rule’ to ‘what does my audience need?’” (DW interview 9/30/02 [p. 2]). Later in the semester, he told me:
I've talked to you about wanting to be invisible, by which I mean that at the end of the semester, they should be thinking about concepts instead of what others say. I don't want them to leave class thinking, "DW says..." I'd just as soon they forget about me after the semester ends. (DW interview 10/16/02 [p. 2])

Although DW rejected the idea of generalizable knowledge about communication that holds true for any communication situation, he did recognize the need to use technical and scientific content in the classroom to practice situated communication strategies. For this reason, he valued the contribution the students could make as "the subject matter experts," while characterizing himself as "the language expert" (DW interview 10/18/02 [p. 2]).

Through his extensive use of questions, DW revealed that he believed students had expertise from their majors (1) that was important to the class, and (2) that he did not necessarily share. Although some students initially felt uncomfortable speaking as experts about topics from their fields of study, they quickly became used to taking on the role of expert when called on, and a large percentage of students seemed to enjoy it. I argue that this is because claiming discipline-specific expertise provided students with an avenue for asserting authority in the classroom in a way that did not conflict with DW's authority (or the authority of the other students, as I will discuss in the next chapter), since the nature of their expertise did not diminish his authority over the course as a whole.

But to encourage students to assert expertise-based authority, DW first had to work against the institutional discourse (discussed in the first half of the chapter) that claimed the instructor of a course holds the knowledge. To achieve this change in his course, DW deliberately set students up as experts early in the semester, while avoiding attributing expertise to himself. In one example during the second week, DW had the class examine and discuss a document from the field of chemistry; throughout the class period, he turned to Ross and Emma—two chemical engineering majors—to speak as experts on the document. Although they initially claimed not to know much about the specific area of chemistry discussed in the document, they increasingly accepted an expert status as the class went on. Below I have transcribed those parts of the conversation involving Ross and Emma:

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[31] DW argued that the students' expertise was local to his classroom because the students "were subject matter experts in this class, but when they begin their jobs in a few months, they will be novices." Similar to my concept of authority, therefore, DW believes that expertise manifests within specific contexts.
DW: Ross, what is this paper about?
Ross: I’m not sure. It’s complicated. It’s beyond me. It’s from a very specialized area of chemistry.

DW: Emma, what can you add to Ross’ comments?
Emma: It’s very technical. It’s almost like it’s a thesis paper or something like that.

DW: What’s a thesis paper?
Emma: To get into the next level of degree, like a master’s, you have to write a thesis paper.

DW: Do thesis papers usually have sections on applications?
Emma: No.

DW: There seems to be some application at the end of section 1. (class notes 9/4/02 [p. 2])

 DW: Can you get an understanding of the text through the charts and captions?
Ross: Yes. (ibid. [p. 2])

 DW: Emma, could we set this experiment [described in the article] up at ISU and run it?
Emma: We might be able to run it, but I don’t think so.

 DW: We might not have the equipment?
Emma: Right.

 DW: Why is it important that we know if we could replicate this experiment, Ross?
Ross: It’s not valid if you can’t repeat it. (ibid. [p. 3])

Notice in the example above that Ross and Emma were not immediately eager to claim expertise in this specialized area of chemistry, and Ross tried explicitly to avoid claiming any expertise. Once DW continued to speak to them as though they were experts to the class, however, they stretched themselves to bring in information they did know that might be relevant (for example, Emma spoke about thesis papers).

To some degree, Ross and Emma’s expertise in this dialogue was an illusion; they were not actually generating much of the information raised but being led to particular responses by DW’s questions. But as a result of this first conversation in which DW
admittedly did much of the work in generating ideas, Ross, Emma, and other students in the class became more willing to claim disciplinary expertise, often with less overt guidance from DW. Following the semester, several students pointed to this class period as an important one in which they began to recognize their own expertise and the expertise of their classmates. And while at least two students concluded from this exchange that DW was not going to draw negative attention to students if they gave the “wrong” answer (Emma email interview 2/10/03; Jill interview 1/30/03 [p. 5]), none of the students I talked to concluded that DW was actually the content expert in this conversation. As a result, by the end of the same class period in which DW called on Ross and Emma to speak as experts, he was able to raise issues with several other students who were now somewhat prepared to speak as subject matter experts. For example,

**DW:** Jill, in Community and Regional Planning, do they use the same elements such as abstracts, methodologies, findings, etc?

**Jill:** Yeah, but ours are usually in separate sections.

**DW:** So sections with clear headings?

**Jill:** Yeah, for example, this summer I had an internship where I needed to write several reports... [student goes on to describe the writing in that internship]. (class notes 9/4/03 [p. 3]).

Although DW had some success in getting students to claim content-specific authority as early as the second week of the semester, he found it more difficult to convince them to claim expertise in their written communication without relying on “rules” provided by the text or an instructor. His goal for the class, as mentioned above, was for students to make context-specific decisions rather than relying on the perceived expertise of another, and some students were able to achieve some level of independent, critical expertise that DW hoped for. Throughout the semester, he identified a handful of students from his classes who showed signs of constructing their communication around perceived audience need rather than according to a set of “rules.” One student, Nancy, commented after the semester that her refusal to accept “rules” was one of her strengths in the class:

I think I challenged the professor. I asked “why?” a lot. I don’t like to be told to do something new or different if I don’t see why or how this is improving current technique. If the professor didn’t know why different methods work better, how do I know that it is? (Nancy email interview 3/5/03)
For the most part, however, DW's students continued to accept him as the one whose expertise most mattered in the course. When asked in the final survey what students had demonstrated authority in the course, three students said that no one but DW was an authority. When the CTE evaluator visited the course to conduct an outside evaluation, the students identified DW's knowledge about "real-world" communication as one of the three greatest strengths of the course (this comment was particularly concerning to DW who asserted to me throughout the semester that "the real world is a fantasy" and tried to avoid making any claims about his own expertise to students). In conversation with me, DW acknowledged how difficult it can be for students to assert their own expertise in a course rather than relying on the expertise of the instructor:

> There’s been a pretty small number of students who have been successful with that over the years. I was thinking that the most obvious success was when I was at [previous state university], there was a student who challenged me and the text on a daily basis from almost the beginning of the semester. But she already had a B.A. in political science from Yale when she took my class. Is that what it takes to achieve what I’m talking about?… (DW interview 10/16/02 [p. 2]).

Throughout the class, DW encouraged his students to use the structure of professional and academic expertise to assert authority when discussing discipline-specific communication and addressing specific communication situations effectively. DW had some success in convincing students to assert content-specific expertise in class discussions, in part, I believe, because this type of authority did not conflict with institutional structures giving DW authority over the direction and management of the class. Although DW would have liked the students to assert authority over the management of the course as well, students remained reluctant to do so. In Frida’s class, also, there were times when students could have claimed disciplinary expertise but chose not to. What makes it so difficult for students to claim disciplinary expertise and authority, even when they believe they have it? In the next section, I consider the relative impact of the two discursive structures I have discussed in the chapter to demonstrate the ways in which institutional status exerts greater force over students than does their own sense of their expertise.
**Institutional Status is More Influential than Expertise**

In the last section, I described DW’s efforts to persuade students to assert their own expertise rather than to assume he held the knowledge that would be most relevant to the class. Students’ reluctance to assert this type of authority was evident in both the classes I observed—students seemed to be more constrained by the hierarchical nature of the instructor-student relationship than by their own perceived expertise. Notice, for example, that Emma, Ross, and Jill in the conversations described above, were more likely to assert authority in the instructor-student relationship when actively encouraged to do so by DW, a phenomenon I described in the first part of this chapter. And despite DW’s reluctance to discuss with students his own expertise and experience, many students continued to assume that DW was the authority/expert in the classroom. But perhaps the best indication of the pervasiveness of the instructor’s status in determining authority relationships was the number of times students backed down from claims of expertise when they believed expressing that expertise would conflict with the instructor’s institutional authority. Below, I offer examples from each class to demonstrate this point.

During the resume assignment early in the semester, Bob disagreed with much of Frida’s advice concerning his resume because he had taken a 1-credit hour job search course in the College of Agriculture the previous year and developed his resume there. When Frida told the class not to provide references right on the resume, Bob at first protested that references were expected in applications for agricultural jobs. Based on his claim, Frida agreed that he should include references and suggested several alternative ways he could reformat his resume to keep it to a single page. In my observations, Frida’s suggestions did not seem to directly contradict the advice Bob received from his professors in Agriculture, and when faced with specific contradictory information (as when Bob said he was expected to include references), Frida tended to accept his claims. In conversation with me and other students, Bob seemed to be projecting more resistance onto Frida than was actually there. But two weeks later during an individual conference when it came time to prepare the resume to be graded, Bob backed down from his claim. He began by distancing himself from the claims he made by attributing the expertise originally claimed for himself to another instructor: “See when I came into [writing my resume], I got told I didn’t need to change
anything by my Ag. professor. That’s what keeps throwing me off” (Bob conference 10/8/02 [p. 2]). Soon after that, Bob made all of the changes Frida originally had suggested. It is important to note that he did not make these changes because he was persuaded that Frida’s suggestions would improve his resume. In a conversation with his small group after the assignment, Bob claimed that he only made the changes for the resume he turned in, but he planned to use his own, discipline-approved resume when he went on the job market (class notes 9/19/02 [p. 5]).

This belief that individual expertise was not sufficient to alter a traditional hierarchical instructor-student relationship occurred increasingly in Frida’s class as the semester progressed. As I noted in the first half of the chapter, once Frida had returned the instructions assignment with poor grades and asked the students to produce better quality work, the students gradually asserted less and less explicit authority over the course. In addition, after this point in the semester, they also made fewer substantive claims of their own expertise unless specifically asked to do so by Frida. The students seemed to believe that Frida had invoked a more traditional authority role with the return of the instructions assignment even though that was not what she intended, and as a result, they adjusted their own behavior in the class as a whole.

Similarly, even though DW had conditioned the class to speak as experts based on their professional and academic experiences, students tended to cede expertise to DW, when necessary, to maintain the traditional instructor-student relationship. Typically, DW avoided claiming any knowledge about the students’ majors; even in those instances where the nature of his questions seemed to indicate a depth of unspoken knowledge, DW deliberately maintained the “learner” role to encourage the students to speak as experts. As a result, on the rare occasions when DW did acknowledge familiarity with a field, students who had confidently spoken as experts only moments before quickly backed off. The following example occurred midway through the semester:

DW: What is the difference between concrete and cement?
Zed: Cement is like what you would buy at Ace Hardware. Concrete has other elements mixed with it, including things like superplasticizers, which are used to make concrete stronger. For example, when you can’t use rebar.

DW: When might you use superplasticizers instead of rebar?
Zed: In bridges or something like that.

DW: When might you not be able to use rebar in bridges? I'm just curious because I used to work bridge construction before I did this.

Zed: Well, maybe not in bridges. I'm not sure. (class notes 10/21/02 [p. 4])

Notice that early in the conversation, Zed spoke confidently about the topic, but as soon as DW acknowledged his own expertise, even though he was careful to maintain his role as knowledge-seeker ("I'm just curious"), Zed declined to play the expert role any longer.

Instances such as this one highlight the fact that DW could have had a very different authority relationship to the students had he not made extensive, deliberate efforts to resist the institutionally defined roles of the university. DW acknowledged the efforts he felt compelled to make in discussion with me. During a two-week activity in which class members read and responded to each other's definition reports written for non-experts, DW refrained from reading each draft until after the class' discussion about it because he was wary of leading the discussion too much. He said, "as soon as I say something, it shows up in the paper" (DW interview 10/16/02 [p. 2]). Frida, too, discussed the work she did on the first day of class—starting with jokes, revealing personal information, discussing times when past students made changes to the class structure—to convince the students to move beyond institutionally defined roles to create more complicated instructor-student authority relationships.

Ultimately, although the multi-disciplinary nature of the class and DW and Frida's encouragement sometimes made it possible for the students to assert their own expertise, they remained constrained by the structure of the classroom and their institutionally-defined roles. While they remained within the university, the students did not seem able or willing to rely on their own professional and academic expertise when that expertise contradicted the authority of the instructor. Following the semester, for example, Jen talked about how she sometimes did not speak up in class when she disagreed with Frida: "I didn't want to make her upset at me. I wanted her to like me because I felt like if she liked me, she'd give me a better grade" (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4]).

Frida and DW's classes, then, seemed to confirm research on client-based projects that indicates workplace simulations are constrained by students' inability to escape the
structure of the classroom, including their concerns with keeping instructors happy as a means for attaining course grades (e.g., Dannels; Freedman, et al.). In those studies, just as in my research, students’ awareness of the institutional structure remained a strong factor in students’ decisions about how to assert their authority in assignments and in the class itself.

While students at times chose not to assert their expertise because they seemed to fear doing so would have negative repercussions, I also believe that institutional structure benefited the students in ways that relying on their own expertise did not. As I mentioned earlier, students who have reached the junior or senior year of college have extensive experience working within the hierarchies of relationships defined by the institution and may find it disconcerting to have those rules changed. In addition, in a traditional instructor-student authority relationship, the instructor sets the parameters for the course and determines for students what the most appropriate course of action will be. This stability can be comforting for students who perceive that if they just adhere to the guidelines established by the instructor, they will be successful in the class. When an instructor refuses to set those parameters and asks the students to instead take authority over their own work, the security of adhering to another individual’s guidelines is no longer there. Students inexperienced in making independent decisions based on past experience or disciplinary knowledge may feel increased anxiety in classes where the balance of authority is shifted in this way. This anxiety could be observed in Frida’s class; when she refused to provide detailed guidelines for completing an assignment or following the syllabus, she was often swamped with 5 to 10 students who stayed after class pressing for more details. And when either Frida or DW encouraged the students to assert authority and expertise over their own writing, the students resisted by pressing the instructors to give them more explicit instructions.

Throughout the semester, students and instructors were able to use the structure of expertise to assert authority in the class. But for students, these opportunities remained limited, both because they felt constrained by the continued pervasiveness of their instructor’s institutional status over them and because the students themselves benefited from relying on specific guidelines from the instructor rather than on their own expertise.
Although institutional structure ultimately exerted greater influence over the classes I observed than expertise, both structures were clearly evident and at least some of the effects of each were easy to identify. Many of the other structures influencing instructor-student interactions, however, seem to have effects that are more difficult to isolate. These structures include perceptions of such characteristics as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, which are often not addressed explicitly in courses or other settings and, therefore, may influence instructors and students in ways they do not realize. In the next section, I briefly discuss just one of these structures—gender—to identify some of the reasons it may be so difficult to isolate.

**Gender Effects on Authority Relationships**

The impact of gender on the field of technical communication has been the focus of several research articles (e.g., Allen, Cummings, and Thompson; Herrick). One reason for this interest is that the field brings together professionals and students from disciplines which are typically male-dominated with technical communicators and instructors from English, long considered a female-dominated/feminized field (Dragga 316). While few general conclusions can be drawn from working with only one male and one female instructor, I did expect to find instances where gender seemed to play a relevant part in instructor-student and student-student authority relationships. However, with only a few exceptions, I primarily found (1) that gender-related factors were tied to other issues, such as expertise and institutional structure, and so were difficult to isolate, and (2) that DW and students in both classes resisted attributing classroom occurrences and behaviors to gender.

There were some instances where my research participants or I identified gender influencing the authority relationships in the class. Frida, for example, was able to identify patterns in her interactions with male students and female students that she believed had held true for her over the course of several semesters teaching technical communication. In particular, she noticed that she bonded more quickly in the classroom with male students, particularly those who were outgoing from the onset of the class. In general, her female students tended to be quieter in class, but she believed that she more quickly formed one-on-one relationships with them via email and conferences. Frida identified this pattern as a problem stemming from the male-dominance of the disciplines of agriculture and
engineering and believed that intelligent women’s voices were being stifled in her class (Frida interview 9/30/02[p. 12]). Similarly, Jen, the only female engineering student in Frida’s class, was able to identify some gender-related issues at work in her relationship with Frida and the other students (I will discuss these factors involving Jen’s authority relationships in more detail in Chapter 6).

For the most part, however, the inter-connection between different discursive structures made it difficult for me to isolate examples of gender effects on the classroom even though I was specifically looking for such instances. For example, compared to DW’s class, Frida’s students were much more likely to challenge her directly and indirectly as early as the second week of class. It is possible to claim that Frida began the semester with reduced authority based on her gender; however, I could also point to her informal classroom style or the perceived lack of organization (represented by changing classrooms five times in four weeks) as reasons for the students’ challenges.

In addition, the difficulty of identifying the effects of gender was increased because the students did not perceive gender as an issue in their authority relationships with Frida or each other. In interviews following the semester, the students from Frida’s class often attributed their perceptions of the instructor-student relationship to institutional status or expertise, but they did not raise the issue of gender. When I suggested that gender might have been a factor in their relationship with Frida (and with one another), the students granted this idea only minimal influence, saying instead that their concern was with the organization of the class or the heavy work-load. Similarly, in DW’s class, I recorded a pattern in his question and answer style, which seemed to indicate that he called on women in the class more frequently than men. He tended to call on women first in conversation, and when called upon, the majority of women offered more detailed and longer answers than the majority of men. When I raised this topic with DW, however, he was surprised and did not identify any gender-related patterns in his teaching (DW interview 10/4/02 [p. 6]).

DW and the students’ lack of awareness of gender factors is perhaps not surprising given that even I, who had some distance from the teaching and learning of the class, found it difficult to isolate gender effects in the classes. For those in the midst of a class who may not
have spent much time considering the beliefs about gender that they bring to the class, identifying such factors may be even more difficult.

Although identifying the effects of gender (or race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc.) is difficult, I believe it should be an important consideration for technical communication—both on a classroom and professional level. Technical communication prepares a large number of women to work within fields that are dominated by men, so it is important to consider how the discursive structure of gender impacts the work that technical communicators are able to accomplish. At the same time, both technical communicators and the students taught in technical communication classes play a role in shaping the future of discursive structures such as gender through their professional communication. Increased awareness of gender better prepares technical communication professionals and instructors to recognize the messages being sent.

The question for studying gender and other difficult-to-isolate discursive structures is how to create a methodology that would allow explicit study of the effects of gender on instructor-student authority relationships. The ethnographic approach I have used here did not yield clear patterns, either in my observations or in participants' self-reported perceptions of the course. Would a large-scale study using survey questions allow patterns to emerge across individual classrooms? Methodologies for studying gender should be developed because, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, understanding the discursive structures impacting authority relationships in the classroom (or the workplace) can help participants make deliberate choices in (re)enacting or resisting those structures.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING CLASSROOMS**

Within the context of the technical writing classroom, I identified two discursive structures that significantly impacted the manifestation of instructor-student authority relationships: institutional structure and expertise. These structures benefited and constrained the instructors and students as they asserted authority in relation to one another, ultimately creating a "doubleness" in which they both (re)enacted and resisted traditional authority relationships.

In the technical communication classroom, in particular, instructors and students negotiated these two structures throughout the semester. While instructors in freshmen level
courses such as composition might find themselves orienting students into the institutional expectations of a given university, instructors of juniors and seniors are in the position of working with students who have already learned these lessons well. Those students who have advanced to the final stages of their college degree, particularly in challenging, work-intensive majors like engineering, have gained a wide range of experience operating within hierarchical classroom authority relationships. As a result, instructors may find students relatively willing to accept the instructor’s particular classroom pedagogy and quickly begin the work of the semester. On the other hand, instructors may encounter resistance from students when asking them to assume authority in the classroom because such assertions of authority require students to take greater risk in terms of their success in the course, the efficient use of their time, etc.

The structure of disciplinary expertise, meanwhile, appears to be particularly fruitful in the technical communication classroom, which brings together students from a wide range of disciplines, who are on the brink of beginning their own professional careers. In such classrooms, instructors find themselves occupying a middle ground where the authority afforded them by their position as instructor, may be contradicted by students’ expertise in areas the instructor does not share and institutional messages about the relative value of different forms of expertise. The instructors in my study were able to invoke their own and students’ expertise to maintain and complicate their relationships of authority to the students.
Chapter 5: Student-Student Authority Relationships

In the last chapter, I discussed some of the discursive structures influencing authority relationships between instructors and their students. Perhaps the most obviously influential and well-defined of these discursive structures stems are the institutional practices of higher education, which place instructors in positions of authority over their students.\(^3^2\) This institutionally-defined hierarchy enables a number of positive things to occur (the work of the semester can begin much more quickly, for example); however, it also constrains the ways in which instructors and students can assert authority in relation to one another.

The discursive structures influencing student-student authority relationships, on the other hand, are much less defined within the university than those impacting instructor-student relationships. Unlike the instructor-student relationship, which has been a historically defined hierarchy in western culture at least as far back as the writings of Plato, discourse concerning student-student classroom authority is relatively sparse. Since discursive subjects are often defined by their object relation to other objects—by the distance between themselves and other types of objects (Foucault, *Archaeology* 52), it is perhaps not surprising that students' classroom authority is most often institutionally defined in relation to instructors rather than to other students. Structures shaping classroom-based measurements among students do exist, such as grade level, grade point average, degree program, and course grades. But while these structures may give students a sense of themselves in relation to one another, even perhaps in hierarchical terms (a senior is more advanced than a freshmen, an “A” student is more successful than a “B” student), these structures do not operate as resources that shape direct relations of classroom authority and power among students. Anthony Giddens has argued that discursive structures both constrain and enable individuals (25). In the last chapter, I argued that the presence of underlying discursive structures allowed instructors and students to quickly begin the work of the semester; in the instance of student-student authority where such classroom structures are not available, the benefits of structures become even clearer. Without them, students must (consciously or unconsciously) negotiate each time they gather in a group how that group

\(^3^2\) These institutional practices are similar to what Michel de Certeau has referred to as the “everyday practices” that make up cultural-historical discursive structures.
will function in relation to one another by finding alternative discursive structures to call on when asserting authority.

Complicating the problem of student-student authority, two of the primary discursive structures affecting students actually work against a model of student-student authority. First, the model of institutional structure that places instructors in power over students leaves students on a horizontal plane where their relative authority presumably does not (or should not) impact one another. Instead students are encouraged to engage one another as social peers and co-habitors rather than as academic or professional authorities. Second, discursive formations of western education focus on the student as an individual, trying to succeed alongside of, or in competition with, other students, but rarely in conjunction with them. The structures identified above—grade point average, course grades, and grade level—are markers of individual student success, and western education does not provide a pervasive, consistent structure for considering students' ability to use their authority, expertise, and power in conjunction with other students to reach comparable, but collective goals. These two structures are often at odds in the classroom: students can attempt to maintain strong social relationships with one another in the context of a classroom, avoiding behaviors (e.g., competing on assignments, asserting strong opinions on how assignments should be completed); alternatively, they might forgo social connections to focus instead on individual academic success. Or they may try to navigate both structures at once, as many of the students in my study seemed to do. Whatever students choose, the common structure underlying student-student interaction—that of socially-based, non-hierarchical relations—influences students as they try to build relationships that allow them to assert authority and begin the work of collaborative projects.

This view of student-student authority is reflected in the available texts pertaining to students' relationships with one another. Foucault states that the "rules" of discursive structures are often dispersed through text (Archaeology 60). Much of the written university policy and academic scholarship available related to instructors and students invokes directly the issues of power and authority involved in that relationship. Texts pertaining to student-student interaction, however, are rarer and appear to be predicated on the assumption that students' relations to one another are primarily social and involve residential and extra-
curricular aspects of their college experience rather than the types of authority or power that might impact academic settings. The *Student Information Handbook* at Iowa State, for example, includes information addressing the classroom instructor-student relationship, such as grade appeals, plagiarism, and sexual harassment, but the information regarding student-student interaction focuses on issues arising in residences or in other places on/off campus besides the classroom. Academic scholarship reveals similar patterns. Student development research, for example, has primarily identified peers' roles in providing emotional and social support to one another (Evans 8-9). And in the ERIC educational research database, for example, a search of the terms "student authority" and "peer relationships" turned up thousands of articles on student retention and residential life, but few that concerned students' academic authority and power relative to one another. Those articles within the fields of technical communication and composition that do address students' work together in the classroom either tend not to address the complicated authority issues involved in such work (e.g., texts describing peer review activities, such as Wilson and Schullery; Speck), or they focus on the effects that other discursive structures such as gender, race, or nationality have on students' interaction with one another (e.g., Gabriel and Smithson; Stygall; Braine). Gail Stygall, for example, argues that "unstructured collaboration in the writing classroom jeopardizes participatory learning for women students" because gendered patterns of communication often lead males to dominate women in groups (253). While work such as Stygall's provides important insight into gender-influenced behaviors in the classroom, this research assumes some type of normative, non-hierarchical student-student discourse that could be disrupted due to issues involving gender, race, language, etc. Looking at moments of disruption such as Stygall has identified—what Foucault calls "rupture," when the smooth functioning of a discourse breaks down, thereby making that discourse visible (*Archaeology* 4)—can be an effective way to identify often-hidden discursive structures, such as gender or race. But with few exceptions (one of which I discuss in the next section), there is not comparable research to tell us how these "normal" student-student authority relationships proceed and the external institutional structures that influence them. Helen Dale, whose research with ninth-grade writers begins the work of identifying specific strategies that young students use in collaborative writing with one another that makes their work together more or...
less successful, identifies in her literature review that while there are calls to research how groups work, prior to her article, she could find no articles that actually did so (334). 

So the written and unwritten discourses available to students tell them that their educational success is an individual achievement and that student-student relationships are predominantly social and non-hierarchical, at least in the context of the classroom. But students do assert authority in relation to one another, in large part, because courses in many disciplines require students to work with one another—on group projects, in study sessions, etc.—in order to successfully complete the course. One reason for this focus on collaboration is that instructors may view student-student authority as a way to resist traditional instructor-student authority relationships; Candace Spiegelman, for example, looks to peer group leaders in composition classes as a way for students to assert authority in relation to one another. Another reason for increased focus on collaborative work is that disciplines are becoming increasingly aware of the collaborative nature of non-academic workplaces and students’ need to develop skills to prepare them to work in groups. Courses in many disciplines, including technical communication, now expect students in upper division courses to complete group projects as part of their semester’s work. Whatever instructors’ reasons for assigning collaborative work, most advanced undergraduate students experience (positively or negatively) the need to assert authority in relation to other students in order to successfully accomplish group projects, but they do so within an institutional structure that does not provide the same support or clear discursive direction that facilitates the instructor-student relationship.

In this chapter, I continue the work of Dale and researchers in engineering education (whom I will discuss in the next section) by examining the methods students in my study used to assert the authority necessary to complete group projects effectively while continuing to be influenced by the discursive rules of peer interaction. I consider two models of student-student interaction proposed by Cynthia Haller, et al. and identify how the students in my

33 There are individual instructors who create their own “texts” concerning student-student authority by including guidelines for student-student relationships in the courses they teach. Similar to articles on the effects gender and language might have on group functioning, many of these clauses are predicated on the assumed need to maintain the non-hierarchical relations reflected in other campus texts. More importantly, the need for such overt statements of student-student classroom engagement highlights the degree to which student-student classroom authority is not structural but must be articulated.
study engaged both models successfully. Then, I discuss how the multi-disciplinary nature of the class made it possible for the students to assert authority in ways that did not diminish the relative authority of other students, but alternately, constrained students when they did not share underlying structures about the value of different types of expertise. Last, I look at the ways students in my study disciplined peers who chose to violate the “rules” of student-student interaction in order to maintain other structures such as individual academic success.

**HALLER, ET AL.’S MODELS OF STUDENT-STUDENT AUTHORITY**

Foucault argues that discursive structures are defined by sets of rules concerning how discourse can be used and what roles participants can assume in relation to one another (“What...?” 120). There is little research available that explicitly addresses classroom-related authority relationships among students; however, Cynthia Haller, et al., researchers in engineering education, have described patterns of behavior that students engage in during group work settings, including several “rules” that govern the successful employment of such patterns.

Briefly, in a study of engineering students’ cooperative learning strategies, the authors identified two types of knowledge-generating interactions that students typically engaged in: transfer-of-knowledge sequences and collaborative sequences. In a transfer-of-knowledge sequence, one or more students assume a teacherly role in relation to other students who act as “pupils.” According to Haller, et al., for transfer-of-knowledge sequences to be effective, the pupils must stay actively involved in the sequence by asking questions or interjecting comments, and the same student(s) must not always assume the pupil role in relation to the other students. One student, for example, might teach the members of her group how to create PowerPoint slides. The other students affirm her “teacher” role by following her instructions and asking questions. After some time or in a later group meeting, another student might step forward to explain research to the group that he found relevant to their project. Collaborative sequences, on the other hand, occur when students generate knowledge together without a clear differentiation of roles. In collaborative sequences, instead of one student teaching the rest of the group how to use PowerPoint, the group works together to explore PowerPoint’s features and design the slides for their presentation. In either type of sequence, the knowledge-generating process can be
derailed if one or more students engages in "blocking," rejecting the contributions of one or more group members.\(^{34}\)

I argue that what Haller, et al. have identified are not "naturally occurring" work patterns but are strategies that result from and constitute again the discursive structures available to students concerning student-student authority relationships. By looking at these sequences, then, we can begin to understand the rules governing student-student authority. Like Foucault, Haller and her colleagues argue that while differences in participants' knowledge, power, etc. influence discourse, discourse itself often creates and/or maintains relationships of power (285).

In my study, the students, who did not begin their group work with clearly defined relationships of authority to one another established those relationships through discourse as they worked. In this way, transfer-of-knowledge and collaborative sequences became tools for asserting authority. In the next two sections, I discuss features of both types of sequences that occurred in my study, focusing in particular on how these sequences made it possible for the students to assert authority in relation to one another within a system of discursive structures that discouraged them from doing so.\(^{35}\)

**Transfer-of-Knowledge Sequences**

Students in Frida's class used transfer-of-knowledge sequences frequently in their work with each other. Students typically have few models for asserting authority in relation to one another, so it is perhaps not surprising that students' transfer-of-knowledge sequences emulate the most easily identifiable authority structure in the classroom—that of instructor-student. Even the terminology Haller et al. use to describe this sequence—"teacher" and "pupil"—acknowledges the relationship being imitated. But one difference between students' use of transfer-of-knowledge sequences and actual instructor-student relations is that there is greater focus in student-student interactions on the power involved in the pupil

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\(^{34}\) For a study that considers the effects that "blocking" can have on student-to-student interaction and the successful completion of assigned group work, see Helen Dale's "Collaborative Writing Interactions in One Ninth-Grade Classroom" mentioned above. Although Dale does not use the language of Haller, et al.'s article, she offers an excellent example of a group whose work is derailed when one member is unwilling to consider another group member's contributions.

\(^{35}\) Because Frida's class focused extensively on small group work both in and out of class while group work in DW's class was limited, the majority of my examples in this chapter come from Frida's class.
role. The power inherent in the hierarchy of the instructor-student relationship is not present in student-student relationships because no consistent, external support is provided by the university or other institution for one student asserting power over another. So students in my study wanting to assert authority had to rely on the cooperation of the other students they worked with. Since student-student relationships are not defined in a clearly hierarchical way, individual students have greater freedom to accept or reject a pupil role in relation to another student; therefore, the active involvement of students taking the pupil role can be a sign of their acceptance of another's authority role, which allows the group to focus on the work to be accomplished. Haller, et al. acknowledge the tenuous nature of the teacher's authority when they claim that “the pupil's lack of interest is interpreted to be a rejection of the teacher candidate” (286). But what makes an “active” pupil? In my observation, students who took an active role as pupils paid close attention to the claims made by the student in the teacher role, asked questions to clarify or challenge the teacher, and offered other verbal and non-verbal affirmations of the student in the teacher role. For example, during the first group project of the semester, Frida asked the students in groups of five to select a feature or set of related features within a software program and then prepare a 20 minute tutorial to teach that software feature to the rest of the class. Sam proposed to his group that they teach the class to create business cards in PageMaker as a way to introduce them to the PageMaker program. One other member of the group, Aaron, was familiar with the PageMaker program, so he and Sam took on teacher roles, and the group engaged in a lengthy transfer-of-knowledge sequence, part of which I have excerpted here:

Sam: I'd like to use PageMaker, I guess, because no one's used it, so anything we say will be useful. Does anyone else have an idea for a different program?

Vince: What can PageMaker be applied for?

Sam: Page layout is what I use it for.

Tina: Is that the margin there?

Aaron: Yeah. What's the "paste special" button do?

Sam: I'm not sure. Let's test it [they do]. Can you guys think of anything else to teach [the class]?

Tina: Do you use this program for drawing?
Sam: I wouldn’t. I think ____ is better for drawing.
Aaron: This is more for professional document layout.
Vince: What about resumes?
Sam: Yeah. I made my resume in PageMaker. Word does all that auto-formatting crap. Here you can put text wherever you want.
Vince: Can you snap that over to the center?
Sam: Yeah. Like this. (class notes 9/10/02 [p. 1-2])

The above interchange meets the criteria for a transfer-of-knowledge sequence set forth by Haller, et al. because Sam, and to a lesser extent, Aaron, have clearly assumed the teacher role by (1) taking over the dominant role in the dialogue, including longer conversational turns (there was a large amount of non-verbal time in which Sam demonstrated on the computer the points he was making about the program), and (2) Sam’s pauses did not result in a loss of conversation turn (when he stopped speaking to figure out a problem on the computer screen or to demonstrate a feature of the program, the other group members watched quietly). More important, however, is the role Tina and Vince played in this exchange. Sam’s ability to hold those conversational turns was due, in large part, to Tina and Vince’s acceptance of his teacher role and willingness to be engaged in what he was teaching. In addition, Tina and Vince maintained this sequence by asking questions that encouraged Sam to continue in the teacher role and by twice declining to claim the leadership role for themselves.

A second feature of transfer-of-knowledge sequences is that some groups were able to use malleability of roles in transfer-of-knowledge sequences (e.g., the teacher in one sequence might be the pupil in another) to maintain an overall balance of authority among the group. In small group work, the students in Frida’s class frequently asserted authority in relation to one another and passed the power within those relationships back and forth with one group member or another taking charge at different times. As a result, the teacher roles shifted throughout the semester, so that students did not maintain the same relations of authority to one another at all times. Looking again at the transfer-of-knowledge sequence transcribed above, we notice that while Sam seemed willing to assume the teacher role in the sequence, he twice offered to cede that role to another group member, and for the most part,
he allowed the pupils to direct the flow of information by their questions. In other situations, Sam clearly assumed the pupil role. One class period before teaching his group members how to use PageMaker, Sam was the pupil in a conversation, excerpted here, with another student about Sam’s draft of a letter:

Bob: You can’t say “please disregard this letter” because it’s too late. They’ve already been discontinued.

Sam: But what if they sent their payment on the same day the letter went out?

Bob: It doesn’t matter because they would still have to renew their insurance. At least that’s the way I understand it.

Sam: Ok, you can make a note of that on my letter. (class notes 9/5/02 [p. 1])

In this example, it is Sam who maintains the sequence by asking Bob a question that allows Bob to maintain the teacher role; Sam then signals his approval of Bob’s teacher role by giving him permission to put the critique in writing. Notice also, that in both of the transcribed conversations above, the “teachers” highlight the temporary nature of the authority they assert—Sam by twice offering to cede his leadership, and Bob by following his corrective statement with the phrase “at least that’s the way I understand it,” opening the possibility for Sam in turn to assert authority over Bob.

Using transfer-of-knowledge sequences did not always result in non-hierarchical student-student relationships, however. I have argued here that authority roles among students shift throughout the semester, but there were some students in Frida’s class who tended to disproportionately assume the teacher role in their work with other students. Other students functioned primarily as passive pupils, expecting one or more members to make decisions for the group and doing little of the work for the project. In the excerpt on pages 109-110, I talked about the important role Vince and Tina played as active pupils in the sequence, but there was a fifth member of that group, Travis, who did not contribute to the conversation. At the end of the semester, Vince described Travis as “a silent group member” who “didn’t put in a lot and was gone a lot” (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 13]). In both Frida and DW’s classes, some groups developed a stable pattern of authority roles that were marked by (1) one or more students with strongly held positions about what work should be done and the way in which that work should proceed, and/or (2) two or more group members reluctant to take initiative and/or responsibility in completing the project. As a
result, one or two students in the group emerged as leaders. For example, interaction in
Donna's group, which was marked by the most clearly defined and asymmetrical authority
roles, included a high number of transfer-of-knowledge sequences with Donna in the teacher
role. During the second group project, active involvement by the other three group members
was low, and Donna often seemed to be instructing her group on what they should do.

This tendency to solidify authority roles might be tied to the discursive structures
students most internalized. For example, students in Frida's class who consistently asserted
the teacher role tended to worry about the impact group work might have on their individual
semester grades. Typically, these students were highly successful in Frida's class and had
high self-reported success within their disciplines as well. In interviews with me following
the semester, three of these students described the difficulty they had relinquishing control
over a project; perhaps this is because as students well-versed with the expectations of
education, they were most comfortable with the single author model of writing—what
Foucault has identified as the author function, a structure for regulating discourse that he
claims extends beyond individual texts or works of art to ideas ("What..." 113). This
structure manifests in academia, as in the rest of western society, through a focus on
individual academic performance. Donna, for example, reported that she did the research her
group members were supposed to do "because even though it's a group thing, it all affects
my grade" (Donna/Vince interview 1/3/03 [p. 17]).

Some students who disproportionately functioned as passive pupils, on the other
hand, indicated in surveys or in conversations with other students that they did not find
technical communication work as important as their work in other disciplines, and so they
did not exert the effort required to assert authority. In other instances, students used other
structures as a measure of their success. For example, four students who had already found
full-time jobs following graduation at the end of the semester said in conversation with me
that they no longer attached the same importance to course grades as those students who had
not found jobs or were going to be continuing their education.

The contradictory nature of the discursive structures the students engaged resulted in
some students choosing to maintain a primarily teacher or pupil role. While those in the
pupil role did not seem to have concerns being viewed in this way by the class, those students
who asserted authority as leaders in their small groups or to the class as a whole remained uncomfortable with this role; in particular, they seemed to resist being openly labeled a leader by their groups or by the class as a whole. They attributed this resistance to their belief that a group leader is expected to do the majority of the work on a project, but I believe that students also resisted declaring themselves leaders because to do so would openly violate the perceived non-hierarchical, social structure of student-student relationships. When Frida asked her students to identify who had emerged as leaders in their group, four of the six groups claimed to have no leader at all, although my observations indicated that a single member in at least three of those groups tended to hold some consistent level of leadership.\textsuperscript{36} One group asserted that two of the four members shared leadership responsibilities, and while the last group did identify a leader (Donna) she made it clear through her comments that she accepted the leadership role reluctantly. Following the semester, both Donna and Vince complained that they felt forced to assume a leadership role in their small groups for the final two projects, and as a result felt responsible for the majority of the decisions and completed the bulk of the work. At the same time, they expressed concern for how other students might perceive them in this teacher role. Vince and Donna described themselves after the semester as having “nagged” the other students to complete aspects of the project. Donna worried that she may have been “horrible,” while Jen described her tendency to take leadership as being “bossy.” Jen’s concern that outspokenness might be perceived negatively was confirmed by responses to the final survey (see Appendix B, survey #4) where several students who identified Jen as a student authority described that authority in negative terms, such as “loud” and “demanding” (I will discuss Jen’s authority in the class in greater detail in chapter 6). Within small groups that did establish stable, hierarchical relationships of authority, the social aspect of the student-student relationship was inhibited as well and the group became focused more exclusively on the work of the class. Vince and Donna, for example, told me that they envied the way a third group—who did not establish a clear leader—was able to maintain a social dimension in their work, which included talking about their personal lives and spending time together outside of class.

\textsuperscript{36} I have noticed the same reluctance to identify a group leader in collaborative projects among students in my own class, even after I present them with research detailing the reasons why groups with defined leadership roles may find it easier to focus on the work of the project.
The transfer-of-knowledge sequence described by Haller, et al. provided a useful lens for considering the ways students interacted with one another by mimicking the hierarchical instructor-student relationship of the classroom. Some of the students in my study were able to use these sequences in ways that maintained overall non-hierarchical relationships where individual authority was limited in scope and time. Other students, however, engaged (willingly or unwillingly) in sequences that established hierarchies among students. Most of the groups in both classes were able to complete their projects within the hierarchies they created, but not all group members were pleased with the authority that they or others asserted in such situations.

**Collaborative Sequences**

As I mentioned above, the majority of the transfer-of-knowledge sequences emulated the discursive structure of instructor-student authority relationships. What Haller, et al., have termed collaborative sequences, on the other hand, model more closely the social nature of other types of student-student interactions and tend, as a result, to be less hierarchical at any given moment. In my study, students used collaborative sequences in groups where no clear leader emerged and/or in situations where the students had differences of opinion but did not want to disagree with one another directly. In Frida’s class, one group in particular, who relied almost exclusively on collaborative sequences during the early stages of their projects, frequently used this strategy for acknowledging disagreements without asserting authority over one another. Below I have excerpted a small portion of one of their sequences:

Dustin: Should we be recommending a specific program in our memo?

Madison: I don’t think we have to, but...

Jen: We could talk about different possibilities for more or less monitoring.

Madison: Don’t forget. This needs to be persuasive.

Bob: Right. So we should offer a recommendation.

Madison: But we also need to say things like “this pro outweighs the con.”

Bob: And we basically need a bibliography from what Frida was saying earlier?

Jen: In my opinion, the basic issue here is the person’s right to privacy versus the company’s right to know what’s going on in their computer. One possible compromise is that the person could use a personal
account to check their email.

Bob: But it's still the company's machine. If something goes wrong or is sent from that terminal, the company will be the ones blamed.

Dustin: Also, if you open something in your email account, you could still launch a virus on the company's machine or mess up their software.

Madison: One con I found to email monitoring is that people are maximally productive only a few hours per day, so if you let them check their email once in awhile, they might be more productive overall.

Jen: That's true. At my job, I couldn't work eight hours straight. And they don't care if you go out in the hall and talk to someone for awhile. A good rule of thumb that my boss taught me is to never do anything on the computers that you wouldn't want your boss to stand behind you and watch you do. (class notes 9/24/02 [p. 6])

No one in the conversation above assumed a clear teacher or pupil role; in the context of the sequence, one student's contribution did not automatically hold more authority than another's. Each person contributed her or his ideas to the conversation without first settling or sometimes even acknowledging the preceding comment. Rather than developing the topics in a linear pattern with one member serving as a teacher or director, at least four distinct issues were raised—whether to make a recommendation, if a bibliography should be included, whether or not email monitoring is effective, and if so, what type of monitoring should be used. None of these issues was settled during the conversation and some topics were dropped suddenly, but the collaborative sequence allowed the students to contradict or correct others' statements without engaging in direct argument. Rather than engaging the point of contention until a decision is reached, which would require students to assert authority over one another, they circled around disputed topics, making several different points without focusing the group on the points of contention. Later in the conversation and during subsequent conversations, the group returned to these topics, fleshed them out further, and ultimately reached consensus without ever declaring one person right and another wrong. Due to their non-linear nature and lack of a clear hierarchy, collaborative sequences can be much messier in their progression than transfer-of-knowledge sequences, but in my observations, this group and others who used collaborative sequences did ultimately achieve group consensus.
The collaborative sequences I observed were effective, but with the exception of the group discussed above, they tended to be rarer than transfer-of-knowledge sequences. In part, this can be attributed to the fact that effective collaborative sequences required most or all participants to exert themselves. In the previous section, I discussed problems that arose when group members assumed a passive pupil role in their groups, allowing (sometimes, forcing) one or two members of the group to make all the decisions and do the majority of the work. A collaborative sequence, however, is more time consuming because decisions are made through group consensus. During those class periods when the group excerpted above used collaborative sequences to explore an assignment, they typically spent all of the available time talking and getting very little writing accomplished; those groups with clearly defined authority roles, however, might talk for five minutes or less before dividing up and beginning work.

In addition, participants in a collaborative sequence must be willing to forgo taking strong teacher roles that could make it easier for them to achieve their individual goals for the project in favor of considering and accepting the contributions of others. Looking back over the semester, Jen recalled that she was able to overcome her tendency to insist on her own ideas through her participation in the collaborative sequences:

Right at the beginning, Bob and I kind of butted heads because we’re both very stubborn people. But we ended up just sort of declaring an unspoken truce, and after that, I was really able to say, “Here’s what I think should happen,” and then take other people’s ideas and incorporate into them. So in my group, I felt like I definitely had authority. People would listen to me and let me say my ideas. But at the same time, I got away from saying, “This is the way it’s going to be,” which is good because I needed to not be like that. I’d definitely say I enjoyed a lot of the group work in the end more so than anything I’m doing now [in group work in engineering classes]. (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 6])

Jen’s description demonstrates the difficult internal and external negotiation students may have to undergo in order to engage each other in authoritative ways while maintaining non-hierarchical, socially-based interactions.

Both transfer-of-knowledge and collaborative sequences represent ways for students to assert authority in relation to one another, and both played an important part in the work
accomplished by the groups, many of whom seemed to use a combination of both throughout their collaboration. Often, the students’ use of these strategies, including determining who asserted authority, when, and for how long, was tied to the expertise each person brought to the class. In the next section, I consider the ways students’ individual expertise enabled and constrained the authority they were able to assert in relation to one another.

STUDENT-Student EXPERTISE-BASED AUTHORITY

Like faculty in many other disciplines, technical communication instructors have embraced group work as a way for students to practice collaboration. But while the students in Haller, et al.’s study were members of the same discipline (engineering) and might be expected to all have the same basic knowledge and abilities to address the problem, students in technical communication come from a variety of disciplines. Previous course work and/or employment experiences can prepare junior and senior level students to take on teacher roles or participate in substantive collaboration in class, but more important to technical communication, the multi-disciplinary nature of the course may function as a discursive structure guiding students as they assert authority in relation to one another. In this section, I discuss ways that students in my study were enabled and constrained by the structure of discipline-specific expertise.

Benefits of Expertise-Based Authority

Because students hold no defined authoritative position in relation to one another, they must find alternative structures to determine who can assert authority in a given situation. In the context of the technical communication classroom, with its focus on professionalization, one of those structures may be discipline-specific academic or work-based expertise. Being able to attribute their authority to academic or professional expertise makes it possible for students to assert authority in relation to one another without negating the authority of other students, as might happen when authority is tied to binary structures, such as instructor-student or male-female. Rather than existing as a binary (e.g., the instructor holds authority in relation to the student), expertise allows for multiple, local assertions of authority that do not necessarily negate or diminish the authority of others. Moving students outside of their majors into what Rolf Norgaard has called “a multi-
disciplinary environment" creates "a rhetorical community in the classroom that is not entirely congruent with the disciplinary community in which the [students'] expertise was first acquired" (52), prompting students "to negotiate expertise as they address design and communication tasks" (51).

When the students I observed wanted to claim authority when talking with each other, they often presented assertions in terms of their expertise from their previous classroom or work experience. For example, during a group project on email monitoring in companies, Jen framed most of her arguments around her experiences working for a federal facility. In the exchange excerpted on pages 114-115, Jen began by identifying the source of her expertise, "in my job," and then supported her claim with reference to company policy and her boss's instructions.

In both of the classrooms I observed (where the instructors actively stressed the importance of discipline-specific expertise), the students generally appeared willing to accept another student's expertise without seeming to feel their own authority in the class was diminished. On the one hand, this may have been because basing authority on discipline-specific knowledge meant that the authority a student held could be temporary: in another communication situation, different types of knowledge might be considered useful. In addition, because the students do not expect to have the same types of knowledge or experience as the majority of their classmates, the element of individual academic competition that I discussed earlier in the chapter may be somewhat diminished. A good example of students' willingness to accept one another's expertise-based authority occurred in DW’s class, where the question and answer pattern of discussion encouraged authority relationships among students as well as with the instructor (in some ways, DW’s I-R-E discussion pattern can be viewed as a type of large-scale transfer-of-knowledge sequence where students rotated the teacher role while DW played the role of active listener/pupil on behalf of the rest of the class by asking questions). At the end of the semester, DW’s class overwhelmingly reported to me in the final survey and in interviews that they felt comfortable asserting their expertise in class, but that no one student emerged as a primary authority. One student reported in his final survey that student authority in the class "Depends on the day. Different people step up on different days." Another student wrote the
following in response to questions on the final survey about which student(s) had the greatest authority in the class:

I think we all worked well as a team—we all got along well—no one was an "authority" besides [DW]. We were all knowledgeable and credible within our own fields and background. Again, no one is more competent than anyone else!

Because DW stressed the importance of multi-disciplinary knowledge and required students to assume both teacher and pupil roles, students may have found it easier to assert authority in front of and to the class when the expertise they had was not necessarily shared by others in the room. Jill, for example, felt her contributions to discussion were "pretty good" because "nobody else was in [Community and Regional] Planning" (Jill interview 1/30/03 [p. 2]). As the only CRP student in the class, Jill felt confident that her knowledge filled a void no one else in the class would be qualified to fill, so she did not worry that asserting her authority would take away from other students’ authority. At the same time, she appreciated those instances when other students asserted authority:

The students that I could tell took time to read [my report] had some really helpful input that I couldn’t have thought of on my own. So I was able to change my paper in ways that they had suggested. I actually put together a list of strengths and weaknesses according to what they put on my paper and used that when I went back and wrote it. (ibid.)

Like DW, Frida facilitated classroom discussion with the belief that different types of expertise were relevant and beneficial to the class. In the final survey, one student reported that "everybody seemed credible and competent in their own area," and Vince stated that because Frida had expressed interested in his past work experience, he was able to contribute to the class information about his past bosses and internships (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 11]). In both classes, then, students were able to see themselves as contributing to the class as a whole without diminishing the relative authority of other members of the class. While most students in both classes believed that they contributed to the class, they generally did not view their contributions as more significant than others’. In this way, with the support of the instructors, the students were able to maintain an institutional structure of non-hierarchical interactions.
Constraints of Expertise-Based Authority

Student-student authority relationships can be positive experiences when they engage non-binary discursive structures such as expertise. But the disciplinary attitudes that influence instructors’ interactions with colleagues in other disciplines may also shape students’ authority assertions in relation to one another. Student-student authority relationships may be constrained when students do not share common institutional and cultural messages about the relative value of different types of expertise. When students do not value particular types of expertise equally, they may begin (consciously or unconsciously) to make distinctions that violate the non-hierarchical ideal of student-student authority relationships; as a result, expertise becomes a structure for measuring or ranking students in relation to one another.

As was the case in the instructor-student authority relationships described in the last chapter, authority relationships among students in my study were sometimes influenced in negative ways by students’ perceptions of different types of expertise.37 The primary example of this occurred in relation to engineering and non-engineering students in each class. At Iowa State, most engineering majors are required to take English 314, while students from the College of Agriculture and some majors in other colleges may choose from English 314, English 302 (business communication), or English 309 (report and proposal writing). As a result, the majority of students in most English 314 classes come from the engineering college. Institutionally, engineering is considered to be an extremely rigorous area of study, so English 314, with its high percentage of engineers, has gained a reputation for being more rigorous than English 302, the business communication course.

Frida and DW’s classes adhered to the typical pattern for English 314 classes: half or more of the students were from engineering. The large number of engineering majors and the university lore about the difficulty of engineering as compared to other disciplines occasionally created a rift among the students in terms of their perception of their own and others’ authority in student-student interactions. Early in the semester, Jen (the only female engineering student in Frida’s class) disagreed with Frida’s use of homework exercises,

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37 These perceptions were not typically discussed openly among the class as a whole, but rather in small groups or in one-on-one conversations with me, so it is possible that some students and/or the instructors may not always have been aware of the disciplinary constraints some students in the classes perceived.
saying: “I think you underestimate your classes. Most of us are engineering majors.” The implication in this statement is that status as engineering majors guaranteed students’ ability and willingness to work hard. While this statement might have been true (and the majority of engineering majors in the study did seem to work very hard in the class), it is notable for what it (perhaps, unconsciously) implies. If majoring in engineering was evidence of student ability and effort, what did that mean for the other half of the class who were not engineering majors?

By itself, Jen’s comment might not have been important. However, that comment presaged a split throughout the semester along disciplinary lines. I observed two effects of this split over the course of the semester. First, not all of the students valued the variety of expertise brought together in English 314. Travis, an Electrical Engineering student in Frida’s class, told his group members that he did not think a “general class” deserved time that might be better spent on projects in their majors (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 14]). Similarly, Tom, a student in DW’s class from Mechanical Engineering, wrote to me after the class ended that a major weakness of English 314 was having a variety of majors in the same class: “Weakness, I would have to say was trying to bring too many fields into a specialized English class. If it were only engineers in the class (or whatever major), I think we could have covered more useful things” (Tom email interview 2/10/03). Both of these students seemed to believe that work within the discipline and among people from the discipline was most valuable. It seems that Travis and Tom did not perceive the class as a valuable opportunity for communicating with experts from other fields as Norgaard proposes; instead, they viewed the rest of the class (possibly including the instructor) as a “general” audience, which in Tom’s opinion, forced the class to talk about more generic topics rather than the specific engineering communication that he valued.

Second (and much more common in my study than the first), some students who were not in engineering had internalized institutional messages about the relative difficulty of various disciplines and so believed themselves to be somehow less qualified than the engineering students. In response to this anxiety, they marginalized themselves by asserting publicly their lack of authority in relation to other students. For example, Bob, an Agronomy major in Frida’s class, tended to make self-deprecating jokes during class, claiming that he
could not spell or write well or understand the material presented in class. The same thing occurred in DW’s class where Mark, a Communications major planning to become a firefighter, often phrased his comments in terms of his own inability to understand the material DW or other students presented to the class. He not only made these comments when called on by DW, but several times volunteered his responses. For example:

Hope: A lot would have to be added to this article if you wanted to explain it to a non-expert. I just can’t imagine how difficult it would be to explain.

Mark: Like she said. In that second paragraph, for example, with all those numbers and crap. That just makes me feel stupid. I mean, I took chemistry, but this is just a joke to me. (class notes 9/4/02 [p. 3])

Mark’s comment clearly hints at his discomfort with the material. Many of Bob’s self-deprecating comments, on the other hand, seemed more light-hearted. For example, during the first week of class, he joked about his inability to spell and to write legibly on the board (class notes 9/27/02 [p. 2, 3]). To me and, eventually, to Frida, he expressed his concerns more directly: on the first day of class, he told me that he dreaded this class because it was “definitely not [his] area” (ibid. [p. 5]), and during mid-semester conferences, which I observed, Bob told Frida and me that he was “overwhelmed” and wished he had taken business communication because he did not fit in with the engineers in the class (Bob conference 10/8/02 [p. 1]). Other students in both classes told me or their small groups that they felt intimidated by the engineering students as well. In DW’s class, Jill claimed she was sometimes overwhelmed because the class seemed to be “full of computer engineering majors,” (Jill interview 1/30/02 [p. 4]). Donna claimed she was not highly skilled in writing or using the computers, except in relation to other agriculture students (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/02 [p. 11]).

In most instances, the students who believed they were unprepared for the class did indeed have valuable insight to offer. However, they typically shared their expertise only with individuals or small groups, while they described themselves as unqualified to the class as a whole, usually in the form of self-deprecating humor designed to get a laugh (and it usually did). Their reluctance to reveal their actual expertise while couching anxiety in the form of humor made it difficult for either Frida or DW to become aware of the extent to which these students seemed to feel alienated in the class. The most obvious example of this
was Bob who contributed in significant and vocal ways to the members of his group and several times assumed authority roles in relation to others (including engineering majors), for example, when he critiqued Sam’s resume:

  Do you understand what I mean about the tenses? Unless it’s a job you have currently, you should get all the verbs in past tense because if you jump back and forth, it looks awkward. And they assume you graduated from high school, so you don’t need to include that. You have a whole inch for high school, so if you get rid of that, you could make the text a little bigger. Also, you have some line-up problems. And on your cover letter—I’m just trying to help you—you list three different positions you’re interested in. You might miss your chance on all of them if they don’t pick you for one. Each position probably has a different person who gets the applications even if it’s the same company. (class notes 9/5/02 [p. 4])

The quote above demonstrates a highly rhetorical understanding about resume writing, but Bob revealed this type of knowledge only in one-on-one or small group interaction with a few students. Similarly, Mark assumed the leader role in his small group at the end of the semester in DW’s class. Throughout the semester, my observations and interactions with Mark and Bob demonstrated that they felt conflicted about their role in the class. By the time Bob told Frida midway through the semester that he felt unprepared for her class and believed he was holding his group (which included Jen) back as they worked on the project, the semester was half over and his feelings of inadequacy had solidified, so he remained unconvinced by her assurances that he was making a contribution. And although Frida assured Bob that he did indeed have important contributions to make to his group, she could not point to specific instances to demonstrate how he was contributing to the class because Bob had revealed his professional and academic expertise only in small groups.

  Expertise can be an important tool for asserting authority in technical communication where students come from a wide range of disciplines. Individual experiences in internships, jobs, and courses can be important tools that allow students to ground their authority in relation to one another, while leaving open the possibility that other students might have equally important expertise to share. But when students do not hold common perceptions of the relative value of different disciplines, they may be constrained in their interactions with one another.
As I have discussed throughout this chapter, some students who found themselves caught in the intersection of conflicting discursive structures chose to break the conventions of student-student relationships by asserting unbalanced authority over other students or by refusing to assert any authority at all. In the last chapter, I discussed briefly some of the ways students feared they might be disciplined for violating the hierarchical structure of the instructor-student relationship. These forms of discipline stemmed, in large part, from students' relative powerlessness (perceived or actual) in relation to their instructors, most notably in terms of their grades on assignments and in the course. By comparison, the relatively power-neutral structure of the student-student relationship makes that relationship less clearly defined and, to some degree, less pervasive. For this reason, it is easier for students to violate the conventions of peer relationships than it is to violate the hierarchically structured instructor-student relationship where the instructor has externally-granted power to enact forceful consequences. The consequences of violating student-student authority conventions may seem minor to some students, and they may even perceive greater benefits to violating these conventions than to following them (e.g., students who assert great control over a project may be more likely to have a final project that meets personal standards of academic excellence; students who decline to participate in groups may have more time for work they do find valuable).

Much like students in instructor-student relationships, the students in student-student relationships did not have strong institutional supports for disciplining group members who transgressed, but the students I observed did find ways to discipline one another. One option was to ask the instructor to use her or his institutional power to intervene in problematic authority relationships among students. In my study, students sometimes asked the instructor to intervene in situations concerning peers who were not participating equally (or in one case, at all) in group projects. For the most part in these situations, Frida and DW, who wanted to disrupt traditional instructor-student authority relationships, were hesitant to assert authority over the students' relationships with one another and asked the students to first try working problems out for themselves. In addition, the students, themselves, seemed to be uncomfortable approaching the instructor with their concerns, perhaps because the socially-
based, non-hierarchical ideal of student-student authority would be violated by invoking the authority of the instructor over the group. Mark and Sandi, for example, decided to talk with DW about the third member of their group, Hope, only after they completed a major assignment without her assistance. Before approaching DW, they spent more than 10 minutes discussing how best to state their concerns without appearing to “tattle” (class notes 12/6/02 [p. 2]). In other instances, students went farther and protected one another from the instructor by indicating to DW or Frida that the group was functioning well, when in fact, there were problems. During conferences, Jen reported to Frida that her group was working well; when Frida mentioned that Bob had already admitted missing two recent meetings, Jen downplayed the significance of these absences to the group—“Oh, I know how that is. I have a tendency to forget about meetings, too”—although she had stated a minute earlier in the conference that “I hate risking a bad grade when other people aren’t doing their part” (Jen conference 10/8/02 [p. 1]).

While some students relied on the authority of the instructor to discipline group members, students more often took the responsibility for disciplining on themselves, particularly when a problem arose with a student seeming to over-step the authority the other students were willing to grant her or him. This discipline typically took one of two forms: (1) students might withhold support or assistance for the member’s ideas or work, or (2) students might withdraw social support. The first form of disciplining occurred when students refused to take an active role in relation to someone else’s leadership as happened during the second project in Donna’s group. Donna reported to me after the semester that she did the work of that project herself with only minimal assistance from her group members (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/02 [p. 13]). The second disciplining option relies on students’ desire to maintain the social aspects of student-student relationships in the context of classroom authority roles. There were several instances when students shunned or teased other students that seemed to be related to the students’ role in the student-student work relationships. For example, between the second and third group projects in Frida’s class, students had the option to change groups. Donna and Adele believed Bonnie and Ken had not contributed to the project, and so they told Bonnie and Ken to find a new group to work with. Ken found another group to join, but Bonnie was unable to find an open space in the
other groups, so she had to return to her original group. Donna and Adele did make some effort to accept Bonnie back into the group in terms of the work to be done, but on a social level, they typically ignored her. On one occasion, three of the group members went forward with a plan for the group to meet at the restaurant where Bonnie worked after her shift was over, despite Bonnie’s complaints that she did not like to do class work at her job and would rather go somewhere else. Another example was Jen, who seemed to have complicated relationships with several people in the class during much of the semester. Within her small group, Jen engaged in a large number of collaborative sequences and was willing to take both the pupil and teacher role in transfer-of-knowledge sequences, but on a class level, she was perceived by some of the students—particularly other engineering students—as asserting too much authority (because she had usually read the assigned material thoroughly, it was not unusual for Jen to respond to questions ten or more times during a class period, including correcting other students’ wrong answers). As a result, other students sometimes made jokes at her expense and avoided working with her on group projects. In one instance, Sam told a group of six students, “I wouldn’t want to be in that group. [Jen] would be psycho to work with” (class notes 9/12/02 [p. 6]).38

Due in large part to the institutionally defined non-hierarchical status of students’ relationships to one another, students do not have the strong tools for disciplining those who violate constraints that instructors do in the instructor-student relationship. But students do have some means for disciplining one another. While a student might make a choice to violate the rules of the student-student structure in order to satisfy the rules of other structures—such as individual academic success—she or he typically does so at the expense of the social and/or academic support of other students.

**INSTRUCTORS’ ROLES IN STUDENT-TO-STUDENT AUTHORITY**

This chapter focused primarily on the way students assert authority in relation to one another, but before closing, I want to briefly discuss the role the instructors played in facilitating student-student relationships of authority in their classes. In both classes, the students identified Frida and DW as important in the relationships students formed with each

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38 There was, I believe, a significant gender component to the male engineering students’ social disciplining of Jen, the female engineering student. I will explore this gender component in greater detail in chapter 6.
other. For example, one student reported on her final survey that student-student
relationships in DW's class were "interactive, which was encouraged by the instructor." This
focus on the instructor's role is perhaps not surprising given the institutional status of the
instructor: her or his decisions about the course and involvement in group work undoubtedly
play an important role in the types and frequency of authority students asserted. In DW's
class, for example, which primarily focused on whole class interaction (peer review of each
student's paper was done as a class, group work occurred outside of class only during the last
two weeks of the semester, etc.), students talked about their authority in relation to the rest of
the class. When asked to describe how she functioned as an authority to other students, Jill
focused on how she responded to questions DW had posed to her in class discussion, saying,
"I don't remember any times in class that he asked me something pertaining to my major that
I couldn't answer" (Jill interview 1/30/02 [p. 2]). At the same time, the students did not
identify the class as having a strong social atmosphere. Jill stated that she did not socialize in
the class and "didn't necessarily form friendships.... To me it seemed like the ones who were
talking before and after class were the ones that knew each other from their majors" (ibid. [p.
4]). My observations supported Jill's description: the students in DW's class did not talk
much before class, and on days when they were given work to do in the lab, there was very
little student-student interaction even though DW had not asked them to be silent. This
classroom atmosphere may have been due, in part, to the structure of the class, which was
divided between whole class and individual work during the first three and a half months. In
the final survey, after the two small group projects had begun, students seemed aware and
appreciative of the change; one student reported in the fourth survey that class was now "a
more relaxing environment. I wasn't as afraid to speak during class."

In Frida's class, on the other hand, which focused heavily on small group work,
students most frequently seemed to identify their authority in relation to one another in terms
of small groups instead of to the class as a whole. When asked to identify which student
functioned as an authority within the class, nine of the 20 students who filled out the final
survey identified someone based on her or his contributions to the small group. And unlike
DW's class, the students in Frida's class spoke often about the strong social bond the
students shared, which Donna attributed, in part, to Frida’s joking, informal approach during the first few days of class (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 12]).

Not all of an instructor’s effects on student-student interactions may be intentional. The ways in which students perceive their relationship with the instructor may affect how they view other people in the same relative position to them, particularly if the instructor-student relationship has some contentious elements. When Frida’s class became upset about having to redo the instructions assignment, for example, they identified that as a time of increased student unity. Vince and Donna spoke about students’ connection to each other during that week:

Vince: I think the packaging incident made it her against us where I don’t think I felt that before.

Donna: Yeah. It did feel prior to that more that we were all in it together trying to figure it out. I mean, she had a little bit of the higher authority, but after that, it seemed more us against her. (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 22])

Madison also identified times when the class was upset with Frida or feeling overwhelmed as important moments for student-student interaction:

I think the biggest strength of our class was that we really pulled together and worked through our frustration together. I think the whole class felt extremely frustrated at times, and everybody helped each other out. For example, when I was having a hard time with my personal web page, one of the other groups emailed me their instructions on FrontPage. (Madison email interview 2/9/03)

Whether deliberately or unconsciously, therefore, it seems that the classroom environment that instructors establish greatly impacts students’ engagement in various types of authority relationships to one another.

**Implications for Writing Classrooms**

Unlike the hierarchically-defined structure of instructor-student relationships, student-student authority relationships in the classroom have not been well-defined historically, despite the increased expectations of collaboration in college classrooms, in general, and in advanced writing courses such as technical communication, in particular. Students working in groups face two contradictory discursive structures, both working against asserting authority in relation to one another: first, students are expected to build relationships that are
socially-based and non-hierarchical, which can make it difficult for students to complete group projects in an effective and timely manner. Second, western educational discourse presents a model of *individual* student success, so students in group situations may risk personal academic success as they try to complete projects.

While students do have some tools for asserting authority in relation to one another, such as the strategies proposed by Haller, et al., the underlying structures remain influential. In my study, students' continued reliance on more traditional models of student-student authority relationships was most evident in the lack of responses discussing students' contributions to one another's writing ability. Although Frida assigned extensive group writing work and DW had students complete full-scale reviews of one another's work and complete two group assignments, the students did not view one another as writing experts at the end of the semester. When asked in the last survey (see Appendix B, survey #4) to identify who they most considered authoritative or competent and credible among the students, only one out of the 43 students in both classes identified someone based on his contributions to the other student's writing ability. The other students either declined to name any one person as more authoritative than another or focused on students' contributions to class discussions or computer knowledge (for whatever reason, students in my study seemed to feel comfortable identifying other students as computer experts, whereas they did not identify other types of experts). And while nine out of the ten students interviewed after the semester reported some improvement in their own competence and credibility as a technical communicator, only two students mentioned the ways in which they learned from other students: Jill said that classmates' comments on her definition report draft led her to revise her paper in useful ways, while Donna briefly mentioned Bonnie's ability to help Donna reduce wordiness in her papers. The other respondents focused on what they learned from the textbook or the instructor (as I discussed in the final section of chapter 4).

In general, the students in my study seemed reluctant to identify one another as authorities, and if they did do so, they tended to view one another as authorities either in computer technology or based on the discipline-specific knowledge they could contribute to class conversations or written assignments. When it came to actual communication ability,
however, students typically attributed their knowledge to the textbook, the instructor, or their own already-held abilities.

I believe, however, that students do learn improved communication skills from one another, whether they are aware of this or not. Earlier in the chapter, I showed several examples where Bob explained appropriate complaint letter and resume writing format to a classmate (see 111 and 123). In other instances, students taught the class or their small groups other communication-related skills, such as grammar, typography, and audience analysis. For example, on one occasion when students in Frida’s class were confused by the textbook’s (and Frida’s) discussion of document design, Sam took over in explaining the process to the class:

Vince: I’m confused. The book says headings should be about 2 points larger than the body text, but at another place it says headings should be twice the size of the body.

Frida: It’s important to remember that points do not correlate to size.

Vince: So 12 point is 2 times the size of 10 point?

Sam: No. There are 72 points in an inch.

Vince: So, it’s like picas?

Sam: No, there are only 6 picas in an inch. But since there are 72, there’s no way that 12 could be twice the size of 10. (class notes 1/24/02 [p.3-4])

In DW’s class, meanwhile, several students demonstrated good rhetorical understanding in their written and verbal critiques of one another’s writing during peer review. As DW called on each person in turn to respond to someone’s draft, students advised one another in detail about what information needed more explanation, how points could be reorganized, and when visuals might benefit the overall organization. Because these “lessons” in both classes were brief and occurred informally, students may not have noticed them at all. While discursive pressure to maintain socially-based peer relationships while achieving individual academic success may prevent students from recognizing or acknowledging the ways in which they learn from one another, my observations did seem to demonstrate that students can and do learn communication skills from one another.
Chapter 6: Case Study—Jen

In the last two chapters, I discussed the general patterns that I identified in the authority relationships between instructors and students and among students. In this chapter, I examine how the discursive structures I have discussed shaped authority relationships in the case of one student in particular. This case study approach provides an opportunity to examine closely the choices one student made in her assertions of authority and how those choices influenced and were influenced by others. Looking at the choices and behaviors of one student in relation to an instructor and other students highlights the difficulties students face when trying to negotiate consistent, positive authority relationships. I do not argue that Jen, the student in this case, is representative of all the students in my study—in fact, I chose Jen as a subject, in part, because she was atypical. But while no one student can act as a model for all possible manifestations of authority relationships, studying Jen’s relationships of authority to others can demonstrate what some of the patterns I discussed in previous chapters might look like.

Jen, a junior engineering major, held two discursively-shaped beliefs about the classroom that complicated her relations of authority with both Frida and other students in the class: first, her sense of her own expertise in the field of engineering (based on academic success and extensive internship experience) informed her belief that she should be able to engage in a more egalitarian authority relationship with the instructor and that she perhaps knew more than the majority of the students in the class. Second, Jen’s understanding of institutional structure led her to realize that Frida ultimately still held the greatest authority over the instructor-student authority relationship and over Jen’s success in the course. Jen’s primary goal was to earn an “A” in the course, so her recognition of Frida’s control over grading significantly shaped when and how Jen chose to assert authority with Frida and other students in the course.

Jen’s beliefs about her role in the class and her desire to succeed in the course led her to assert authority more often—and more visibly—than many of the other students in the class. In her relationship with Frida, this authority typically involved Jen’s concerns about Frida’s decisions and/or classroom management, as when Jen led the class discussion in protesting that Frida underestimated students’ commitment to the class by assigning
unnecessary homework. As a result of Jen’s strong claims for authority in the instructor-student relationship, Frida sometimes viewed Jen as a problem student and as a negative influence on other students. Alternately, in her desire to be successful in the class, Jen sometimes used her authority in ways that supported Frida’s authority at the same time, for example, by participating in lectures and supporting Frida’s claims with evidence from her own academic and professional expertise or by forgoing social elements in the student-student relationship in order to focus instead on meeting Frida’s preferences for the class. These behaviors complicated Jen and Frida’s authority relationship and sometimes led other students to view Jen negatively in the student-student relationship.

In this chapter, I begin with a short discussion of Jen and her performance in the class, including how and why I selected her as the focus of this case study. I divide the bulk of my analysis of Jen’s authority relationships into two sections: Jen’s authority in the instructor-student relationship and in student-student relationships. In the final section, I consider the ways gender may have impacted Jen’s authority relationships and how her participation in small groups, in particular, supported or refuted research on women students in the classroom.

**DESCRIPTION OF JEN**

During the semester I observed her class, Jen was a junior in mechanical engineering and the only female engineering student in the class (the other five women in the class came from the College of Agriculture). Prior to the class, she had already completed two extensive internships—one for the power district of a large Midwestern city and one for a federal laboratory. After graduation, she planned to pursue a Ph.D. in nuclear engineering and then work as a nuclear waste management researcher with a university or government lab (Jen email to Frida 8/27/02). Jen reported that she had significant previous experience with technical writing in engineering courses and in her internships, and she rated her writing skills prior to the semester highly (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 10]). Jen’s perceptions of her own abilities were supported by Frida (Frida interview 9/30/02 [p. 2]) and by her final grade in the course.

Within the class, Jen was one of the first students to whom I assigned a pseudonym because she quickly grasped the relaxed atmosphere Frida tried to foster and was involved in
class discussions from the first day. Along with Bob (a senior in Agronomy), Jen was the most consistently vocal member of the class, and she was the most likely to offer responses to the questions Frida posed to the class. Jen was an active participant in small group activities and assignments and engaged in student-student cross-talk during large-class discussions (rather than waiting for Frida to mediate students’ interactions with one another).

Throughout the semester, Jen took several different authority roles in the classroom. She was the most likely of all the students to speak to Frida about her concerns about aspects of the class, such as homework or assignment designs. On several occasions in the first half of the semester, in particular, Jen voiced concerns to Frida in front of the class as a whole, either in discussion or on the class chat board. She also spoke with Frida individually and by email on several occasions about concerns she had. At the same time, Jen remained throughout the semester an active participant in the class, asserting authority that supported Frida’s by contributing to class discussion 5 to 10 times per class period. In small groups, she took the leader role or participated at least as much as other group members. She typically took the role of spokesperson on behalf of her group and identified herself as the person who kept her groups on track (Jen conference 10/8/02 [p. 2]) and as the one most likely to revise and package final projects (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 7]). Frida and the other students shared my view that Jen strongly impacted the class. Frida identified Jen as the student who most influenced the direction of the class (Frida interview 9/30/02 [p. 2]), and of the 14 students who identified one or more specific classmates as being the student with the most authority in the classroom, eight selected Jen (see Appendix B, survey #4).

I selected Jen as the subject of my case study for several reasons. First, due, in part, to her goals for the course and her sense of her own expertise, Jen experienced complicated—and sometimes contentious—relationships with her instructor (Frida) and fellow students, which resulted in frequent and clearly identifiable (re)negotiations of authority. Foucault has argued that identifying instances of “rupture” when the smooth functioning of power breaks down can be a productive way to study the otherwise normalized structures at work (Archaeology 4); at several points during the semester, Jen provided examples of such rupture. Second, Jen’s astute understanding of institutional structure and her own motives meant that she made deliberate choices in her authority
relationships and was often able to articulate to me or others the reasons behind those choices. Third, Frida and the other students in the class identified Jen as a strong personality who influenced the direction of the class; their perceptions verified my sense that Jen might be a fruitful subject for study. Last Jen, Frida, and I were able to articulate several effects of gender that Jen faced as the only female engineering student in the class, particularly in relation to other students in the class.

My data involving Jen comes from several sources. First, I observed whole class discussions and activities throughout the semester and observed Jen’s small group for three of the four group assignments, including one meeting that took place at a group member’s home. Through Jen and Frida, I accessed some of their email correspondence during the semester. I also have Jen’s contributions to the class chat board. Last, I have survey and interview data pertaining to Jen from Jen, Frida, and several other students in the class.

**JEN AND FRIDA: STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR AUTHORITY**

Frida: How many of you when you get a job just want to get started and get it done?

Jen: I do.

Frida: Over in liberal arts, we like to get together first, talk things over, build a little commitment to each other. That’s why we’re on separate sides of the campus from you.

Jen: Yeah, got to keep us apart.

Frida: Separated by the giant lawn. (class notes 9/12/02 [p. 5])

The authority relationship between Jen and Frida demonstrates the potential complexity of instructor-student authority in technical communication classes, a complexity that is due, in large part, to shared and conflicting perceptions of discursive structures shaping the classroom. Jen and Frida’s complicated relations of authority to one another extended throughout the semester. Jen often disagreed with decisions Frida made in the class, and as I will demonstrate later in two extended examples, depending on the situation, she voiced these concerns in class discussions, contacted Frida privately, chose to share her concerns only with other classmates, or perhaps kept them to herself. Frida, meanwhile, believed that Jen asserted negative authority over the rest of the class, encouraging student
underlife (Frida interview 9/30/02 [p. 2]). At the same time, Jen and Frida maintained a lively classroom interaction in which they shared ideas with one another, and Frida came to rely on Jen to provide responses in class when other students were not prepared or willing to participate. Looking back on the semester, Jen acknowledged the complex nature of her relationship with Frida: “I don’t want people to get the impression that I left class in a huff every day, although there are certainly days that I did” (Jen email 3/28/04). I argue that the contradictions Jen and Frida experienced in their interactions with one another stemmed, in part, from their (sometimes differing) perceptions of the discursive structures of expertise and institutional status. As a result, Frida and Jen continued to (re)negotiate their relationships of authority throughout the semester.

In the conversation beginning this section, Jen and Frida discuss the differences between those in the liberal arts and those in engineering and jokingly refer to the need to keep the two groups separated. This conversation is apt because much of the complicated nature of Jen and Frida’s relations of authority to one another can be explained by their different perceptions of what constitutes expertise, which forms of expertise are most valuable, and how expertise should be managed within the classroom. In addition, part of the continuing need for negotiation seemed to stem from Frida and Jen’s varying expectations of one another as instructor and student. I mentioned in Chapter 4 that when people do not hold discursive structures in common, they may find it difficult to engage in the work of the semester. At times, Frida and Jen seemed to have different perceptions of the role instructors and students should play within the classroom, which led to conflict in their relationship with one another.

Jen, for example, preferred a more traditional instructor authority role with the instructor as the “the main giver of knowledge,” providing students with the information needed to complete assignments (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 2]). She described her preferred classroom style as “a lecture that the instructor tries to get the class involved in” (ibid.), and although she recognized the need for collaborative projects, Jen wanted instructors to be explicit about their expectations for a project prior to the beginning of group work. Jen’s preference for this kind of traditional authority relationship seemed to stem from two different sources: first, she believed that instructors should be clear experts in one or more
relevant areas, and that the expertise should then be shared with the students (ibid. [p. 1]).

Second, as a successful student invested in western discourse concerning academic success, Jen recognized that a traditional instructor-student relationship could provide her with several benefits, including a clear sense of instructors' expectations and a more efficient use of her time in achieving the goals of a course.

Frida believed, on the other hand, that strictly traditional instructor-student authority relationships did not prepare students for the professional careers they were about to embark on. In her view, requiring students to negotiate audience and peer expectations in order to complete an assignment was the primary goal of individual and collaborative projects, so she often resisted detailing for the students exactly what could be included in a project. As a result of these differing expectations, Jen perceived Frida as inconsistent and unorganized (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 3]), while Frida considered Jen to be “critical, with a tendency to complain” (Frida interview 9/12/02 [p. 1]).

These differences in expectations of one another were based to some degree on the relative value they assigned to different types of expertise and knowledge. Jen came from Engineering, which she believed was more straightforward than English: “One of the reasons I don’t like English [is that] it’s very subjective. That’s why I enjoy engineering—my answers are either right or wrong” (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 3]). Research by technical communication scholars has demonstrated that Jen is not alone in holding this view of engineering work (e.g., Winsor; Fox). Frida, however, like most scholars and instructors in technical communication, viewed the production and dissemination of knowledge as inherently rhetorical, so she focused in her class on the ways in which successful communication relies on being able to analyze and adapt to a particular situation (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 2]).

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39 Jen reported dropping her first technical communication class, in part, because the instructor’s experience (translating technical documents) was not a relevant form of expertise (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 7]).

40 After reading this chapter, Jen made the following comment: “I can see how in a work environment, you’ll have to figure out a lot of what your boss wants from you on your own, that he or she won’t tell you explicitly what he/she wants, or might not even know. That makes perfect sense, and I think if Ms. Ortega had said something to that effect, I might have accepted the fuzzy expectations for the projects a bit better, and with less frustration” (Jen email 2/24/04). Jen expresses here an important point about the degree to which instructors make their pedagogies transparent to students; at the same time, she exemplifies my earlier statement that Jen, and many of the students in the class, wanted explicitly defined expectations for assigned work.
But Jen and Frida did share some perceptions of what constituted valuable expertise. Both women believed that sharing their own professional experience could provide a beneficial contribution to the class. They also supported and valued one another’s professional expertise, agreeing especially on the significance of professional expertise to Frida’s role as competent, credible director of the course:

The main thing I find I have to do first is establish my authority as an expert in this area. I can’t imagine teaching this class without working in industry because that establishes immediately with them that I do know what I’m talking about. That I’m not an academician but a practitioner who’s going to come into the classroom and share with them MY experience from industry, and that is what’s going to help them. (Frida interview 8/20/02 [p. 1])

I like how she would pull in her work experience into the class and talk about the writing that she had to do. For example, I remember when she brought in all those emails. The vice-president or president of her group wrote a message saying “this needs to be done” and then it got passed down to somebody who passed it down to [Frida] with a very detailed analysis of what she needed to do. So she was able to really show us how that represented transmittal memos and business emails. (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4])

At the same time that Jen argued for a more traditional instructor-student authority relationship based on how knowledge is shared, she expressed the potentially contradictory desire for a less strictly hierarchical instructor-student authority relationship than younger students might have because she and her classmates were adults with expertise of their own, many in very challenging fields of study. So while she wanted Frida to give detailed instructions about how projects should be completed, Jen also believed she (and the other students) should have some say in how the class and various assignments were run. To this end, Jen several times asserted authority that contradicted Frida’s by implying that an assignment or event in the class had been poorly handled. In addition, Jen took her role as evaluator very seriously at the end of each semester, including in Frida’s class, because she believed that as a student, she had valuable insight to offer that the instructor needed and should want (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 18]).

Jen’s perception of expertise in the classroom led her to both embrace and resist a traditional instructor-student authority relationship. This perception was further complicated by her astute understanding of institutional structure and the limits that structure placed on
her in relation to Frida. Jen understood that the power to encourage or discourage a less-hierarchical relationship lay with Frida and that, ultimately, Frida held power over the grading in the course, which was very important to Jen. As a result, there were times when Jen wanted to assert authority in relation to Frida but chose not to out of concern for her grade (ibid. [p. 4]). This concern further complicated her authority relationship with Frida. In order to demonstrate how Frida and Jen’s complex authority negotiation played out in day-to-day classroom interaction, in the following two sections, I describe two situations that unfolded during the semester.

Scenario 1: Class Debate—Homework versus Quizzes

Jen first began explicitly negotiating instructor-student authority with Frida when Frida asked the students to write emails to the class about their views of homework versus quizzes, in preparation for a class discussion on the topic. In response to Frida’s request and the first few emails submitted by other students in the class, Jen wrote:

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From: Jen A...
To: English 314, Section XX
Date: Sun, 1 Sep 2002 20:13:37
Subject: Overloaded email inbox

I realize that learning to communicate through email is an important skill. During both of my internships, there were days, sometimes even weeks, where I would talk to my boss more often through email than face to face. However, I think there are more practical ways to promote written class discussions. This would be through the use of classnet. Classnet is a service provided to any class whose professor or instructor signs up for it. Classnet is accessed at classnet.cc.iastate.edu. From here, the student selects his or her class from the list of classes. The site is password protected, so only students of the class may access it. Instructors then have the ability to post old homework or exams, homework assignments, or discussion topics. From there, students are able to post replies to the discussion topics, or are able to post new discussion topics. These posts could be written in the same format as the emails to the class. This, I believe, would promote more communication, and would keep the amount of mail in my inbox down to a manageable level.

On a different subject, I believe that quizzes are not a practical way to encourage students to read the reading assignments. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that no homework assignment or quiz is going to force a student
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With the exception of the use of pseudonyms and the obscuring of identifying markers such as section numbers, all emails are recorded exactly as sent.
to read an assignment that he or she does not want to read. A student will only do the reading if he believes that not reading it will adversely affect his grade. Some people skim a reading assignment and do well on a quiz, while another person may study the reading material intensly, and still do poorly on a quiz. The result of this is that quizzes are not accurate test of people’s ability to learn.

Jen A..., section XX

After several other students emailed their preferences for the quizzes or reading assignments (with some students arguing in favor of quizzes and others voting for homework or a combination of both), a second thread of communication began involving students’ difficulties accessing the online textbook. At this point, Jen emailed again to discuss the textbook and her dislike of quizzes and homework:

From: Jen A... 
To: English 314, Section XX 
Date: Tue, 3 Sep 2002 10:16:56 
Subject: Re: PWO problems

I have had that same problem with the PWO book. I have a used book, and whoever had it before me already registered with that password and did not put his/her new username and password in the book. I am going to go to the bookstore and trade the used book for a new book. Until then, try emailing the professor explaining the situation. She gave me her username and password to use until I have my own account set up. Hope this helps.

Also, in regards to the debate of homework verses quizzes: I for one believe that, in some circumstances, homework can be very valuable. When an instructor chooses homework thoughtfully, as a means of accentuating an important point or concept that needs to be understood from the readings, then homework questions are the way to go. However, our instructor has admitted that she assigns the homework as a means of making us read the chapters. I feel this is adding an unnecassary amount of work to a class that is already more demanding than most of my other classes. Most of us are upperclassmen. Furthermore, we are all majoring in engineering or science related fields. It is not possible to make it this far in these difficult and demanding majors by reading the text only when there is homework that is assigned. I for one always read the text irregardless or whether or not there is homework to go along with the text. We are not children, and we do not need an instructor to hold our hands. As adults, we can decide for ourselves whether or not the readings will be valuable to our learning. I believe that, for the most part, we will read the text, because we will find it a useful learning tool. But the homework assigned in this class seems to me to be nothing more than busy work.
I am definitely busy enough as it is, and I'm sure most people in the class are as well. Homework assigned to make adults read the assigned text is annoying at best and offensive to intelligent, hardworking people at worst.

Jen A...
Section XX

Frida did not directly respond to Jen's or anyone else's emails during this exchange. Instead, she raised the issue of homework versus quizzes in class discussion, where Jen again contributed to the conversation her displeasure with the homework exercises they had been assigned:

Jen: I don't mind quizzes, but I think making us do homework just to make us read is ridiculous.... I think you underestimate your classes. Most of us are engineering majors.

Vince: I disagree. Quizzes are hard for some people even if they've read, while those who don't read can often fake their way through. What about a combination of homework and quizzes but less of each?

Najeeb: What if we did open-note quizzes? That would help people who read but have trouble with tests, and then it would be harder for people who didn't read to fake it.

Frida: That's a really good idea. What do the rest of you think?

Jen: Back to the homework issue. With homework exercises, people will just skim to get to the homework, but with the note quizzes, they might read more closely and write things down.

[Conversation continues as students ask Frida what type of tests she gives, and another student asks Frida to eliminate those exercises where students have to find sample documents].

Frida: Maybe I could bring in the sample documents. Would that be more useful? [Jen raises her hand]. Ok, Jen, you can say one more thing about the homework, but then we're going to vote.

Jen: I agree. The questions are really dumb. They're idiotic. And I thought the point of the PWO was to give us the practice we needed. (class notes 9/3/03 [p. 3-4])

After this last comment from Jen, the class voted unanimously to replace the homework exercises and quizzes on the syllabus with the open-note quizzes Najeeb had proposed.

This email and in-class debate was a significant moment for Jen in terms of asserting her authority in the class. Following the semester, she recalled it as a moment when she had been fully honest with Frida concerning her feelings about the way the class was being run.
(Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4]). Other students in the class also identified this as a moment when Jen asserted a high amount of authority in the class, although they seemed to be divided on whether this authority was positive or negative:

Vince: I think Jen definitely had an effect on the class, and I think it was a good effect. She brought up her views, and how she felt about assignments. She wasn’t afraid to say “I think these assignments are useless or a waste of our time.” I think that’s good because I know other people had the same feeling. [On the other hand], I think Jen brought some negative aspects to the class of almost disrespecting.

Donna: I would agree with that. It was good that she was trying to change things. I wasn’t always sure, though, that she was respectful in the way that she approached them. And in reality, Frida is the authority, and I think we do need to respect her, much less as a person. (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 10-11])

These statements from Vince and Donna indicate that they valued a student’s willingness to speak out in class and viewed it as action taken on behalf of other students in the class, but they also seemed to have concerns that the hierarchical nature of the instructor-student relationship that I discussed in Chapter 4 might be violated by what they called Jen’s “disrespect.” Below I discuss some of the authority moves in Jen’s communication in this scenario and consider why she became increasingly passionate about this topic the longer it was discussed. I also discuss a response from Frida that occurred a little over a month later.

Features of Jen’s Communication

Jen asserts authority in this scenario in several ways. First, she offers the unsolicited proposal to change the class structure by moving the class email dialogue onto a chat board. Jen supports her suggestion by claiming professional expertise based on two internships and by instructing the class, including Frida, on how to locate and set-up ClassNet. In the second email, which is more confrontational than the first, Jen asserts increasing authority that might violate a more traditional instructor-student relationship (and lead to what Donna and Vince referred to as “disrespect”), seeming to reprimand Frida for wasting the students’ time and more adamantly stating that homework exercises should be eliminated. By the in-class discussion, Jen advances in her authority claims to directly addressing Frida: “I think you underestimate your classes.”
A second feature of Jen's communication is that it provides an example of several "levels" of student authority assertion. In the first email, Jen's positive, professional tone leaves room for alternative assertions of authority by Frida or other students even as she asserts clear authority in her claims for how class should be run and about her own professional expertise. For example, Jen begins with a statement of goodwill, acknowledging the value of the assignment Frida has set them. As Jen continues into those areas in which she disagrees with Frida's decisions, she maintains an open tone by framing her claims with statements such as "I think" and "I believe." I argue that in this first email, Jen remains acutely aware of Frida's continuing authority in the classroom and in the instructor-student relationship based on her status as instructor, so Jen makes careful moves to retain goodwill and avoid over-stepping the boundaries of appropriate student authority. Although she states directly that she does not think quizzes are useful, she treads carefully by talking about what "students" and "people" might do. In her second email, by contrast, Jen becomes more direct in her comments, talking about "we" and "our instructor," so her assertions of authority over this particular class become stronger. Her word choices further imply that she now assumes herself to be speaking on behalf of the students as a group. In addition, although Jen does continue to use some phrases such as "I think" in her second email, her increasingly confrontational tone no longer implies the same openness to other assertions of authority. In the classroom discussion, Jen's authority assertions are at their highest (and, it might be argued, their least controlled). She uses language such as "ridiculous" and "dumb" to describe the homework Frida has assigned, and she twice takes control over the direction of conversation from Frida.

Understanding Jen's Authority Moves

Throughout the scenario described, Jen's authority moves escalate in frequency and intensity. What causes her to move from carefully couched claims to "ridiculous" in only a few days? First, as I showed in Chapter 4, students in my study were more likely to assert authority in the instructor-student relationship when encouraged by the instructor to do so. Frida had previously encouraged the class to tell her what assignments were not useful to them in their fields (class notes 8/27/02 [p. 3]) and had specifically asked the students to give their opinions on the homework and quizzes (Frida email to class 9/1/02). The fact that Frida
encouraged "honesty" was an important factor in Jen's decision to be as vocal as she was (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4]), and following the semester, Jen recalled Frida's openness during the email exchange and in-class discussion as a positive aspect of Frida's relationship with the students (ibid.). So Jen's continued—and escalating—assertions of authority can be attributed, in part, to the fact that Frida did not intervene or discourage Jen's statements between the first, second, and third communications. Frida's willingness to allow the conversation to continue and to raise the topic in class seemed to signal approval of the authority Jen and other students were asserting.

Second, as I mentioned above, Jen believed that in an ideal instructor-student relationship, the instructor would recognize that her or his students are competent adults with expertise of their own and would, therefore, engage in less hierarchical relationships of authority with them. In Chapter 4, I discussed the idea that professional expertise might make it possible for instructors in classes such as technical communication to facilitate just such types of complicated authority relationships with their students. Jen's preference for such an authority relationship seemed to inform her arguments in this situation, particularly in her second email and in her in-class discussions with Frida and the class. She claims specifically that she and her classmates are "adults" who are successful in engineering and science, two demanding fields of study, and based on this belief she makes a number of assumptions in her communication—e.g., students should be able to speak frankly; instructors should trust students to decide how best to be successful in the class; students may contribute to classroom management and may introduce instructors to new teaching methods (such as the use of ClassNet, which Jen proposes in her first email). I speculate that the change in authority assertions in this scenario reflects Jen's shifting focus from maintaining appropriate instructor-student roles to protecting her own academic and professional abilities, which she believed were not being respected sufficiently. In my observation throughout the semester, Jen seemed to shift in her choices of authority depending on the discursive structure that appeared most prevalent to her at the moment.

Features of Frida's Response

In the example I have described, Jen appears to resist the institutional structure and practices that shape a traditional instructor-student authority relationship. To some degree,
this resistance was made possible by Frida's permissiveness: although she seemed annoyed in the class conversation when she told Jen, "Ok, you can say one more thing about the homework," she did not directly discourage any student's emails or in-class statements at the time, which Jen identified as a sign of support for students' "honesty." However, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation, authority relationships remain in constant negotiation, and later in the semester, Frida used the email exchange described above to reassert her own authority, and to some degree, to re-establish a more traditional instructor-student authority relationship. This continuation of the dialogue occurred when Jen included her second email in a portfolio designed to demonstrate her ability to effectively communicate via email.

Frida reacted to Jen's inclusion of this message in an email of her own:

```
From: Frida Ortega
To: Jen A...
Subject: RE: Email Memo
Date: Sun, 13 Oct 2002 23:29:35 -0500

Jen, while you have done a good job of the email assignment, I would like to caution you in one area -- your tone is not particularly "respectful" as you have stated. I am not easily offended, particularly by students (I assume most have some growing up to do before they can effectively communicate on an adult level). However, I were your supervisor (esp. if I were less educated or less intelligent than you are -- and, believe me, that could easily happen in life), I would definitely take offense at the tone you have used in the emails attached to this assignment (see one sample below). As I have been reminded in my own workplace, there are certain unspoken rules for speaking to your "superior" (whether that is a supervisor, an instructor, or a colleague who has more experience or seniority than you).

In addition, if you plan to be critical, which I feel is a very important role in an organization, always use your best language skills and, especially, use spellcheck. In the sample below, you even spelled "intelligent" incorrectly. In these cases where you may offend someone, remember to be on guard as they will most certainly be looking for a way to criticize you in return.

While I am quite certain that you will be able to handle whatever situation is created by the tone you use in your emails, I think it is important for you to know that your personal assessment of your writing may be skewed.

Example:
[includes the last two paragraphs of Jen's September 3rd email]

Frida Ortega, Instructor
English Dept., Iowa State University
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Although delayed by more than a month, Frida makes a number of authority moves in this email that work to re-establish a hierarchical relationship between Frida and Jen by invoking the discursive structures of institutional status and expertise. For one, Frida reminds Jen directly at the end of the first paragraph that as instructor of the course, Frida is Jen’s “superior.” Frida reinforces her position by highlighting the expertise she has that Jen does not share—by instructing Jen on several misspellings in her email and on the nature of corporate culture. In addition, Frida implies that Jen’s email could be considered offensive (i.e., a violation of appropriate instructor-student authority roles) and that as a student, Jen may not be prepared to communicate on the adult level she has requested (a statement that seems to contradict Jen’s sense of the value of her own expertise). Finally, Frida ends the email by stating that she is better able to assess Jen’s communication success than Jen is. As we see in this letter, the encouragement that Jen perceived in Frida’s silence earlier in the semester (and which, as I discussed in Chapter 4, is an important factor in students’ decisions to assert authority in class) has been removed.42

Even here, however, Frida’s authority moves are tempered, a choice that ties in with her continuing goal of altering the traditional instructor-student relationship to prepare students for complicated relationships of workplace authority. I believe it is important, for example, that Frida did not respond to Jen’s emails or in-class discussion at the beginning of the semester, a move that could have quickly re-established a strictly hierarchical relationship of authority between Frida and Jen. Instead, she waited until later in the semester when Jen returned to the topic and indicated by including the email in her portfolio that she interpreted Frida’s silence as support for Jen’s communication approach. Similarly, in the response itself, Frida stops short of directly claiming to be offended, and while Frida states that “most” students are not prepared for adult communication, she does not state that this is the case with Jen, which avoids direct confrontation. Other statements Frida makes, such as her implied statement in paragraph 1 that Jen is highly intelligent and her assumption in paragraph 3 that Jen will be successful in her professional career, work against the strong

42 Frida’s response to Jen’s email was most likely prompted not just by the original exchange, but also by additional conflicts that had occurred in the five weeks since the class debated homework versus quizzes. Note that Frida’s response to Jen was sent on October 13, almost a month after the much more vitriolic situation I describe in the second half of this section.
authority moves that Frida makes at other places in the letter. Finally, at the end of paragraph 1, Frida acknowledges the communication difficulties Jen faces by stating that she has made similar mistakes in her own career.

This first scenario demonstrates well the ways in which the structures of institutional status and disciplinary expertise may cause students to hold seemingly contradictory perceptions of effective methods for asserting authority in the instructor-student relationship. This scenario also demonstrates the point made in Chapter 4 that (perceived or actual) instructor authority is an important factor in how or when students assert authority, and similarly, how easily instructors can revoke that perceived support. Finally, this situation demonstrates that an instructor and student may not perceive their authority assertions in similar ways. In this example, Jen believed she demonstrated effective, respectful communication while Frida believed Jen was being deliberately challenging. Several factors influenced Jen's assertions of authority in this situation, notably her belief that she should be treated as an adult by instructors and her perception throughout the communication situation that Frida was encouraging the types of authority assertions Jen was making. In the next scenario, Jen again attempted to assert authority over the class, but this time, she did not perceive the same type of support from Frida. As a result, her assertions of authority decreased over time rather than increased, and her sense of Frida's institutional status and her own desire for success clearly influenced her authority decisions.

Scenario 2: The Quick Reference Card (QRC) Project

A second example of the complicated authority negotiation that Frida and Jen engaged in occurred during the first group project. In this situation, Jen, in particular, seemed to vacillate between her desire to assert authority by clearly expressing her anger and to maintain a positive relationship with Frida by performing well as a student. In the previous section, I discussed Jen's belief that the majority of technical communication students are competent adults with expertise of their own, which should result in a less hierarchical instructor-student relationship (Jen email to class 9/3/02). From this idea came Jen's desire to engage instructors as fellow adults, which made her more likely to assert authority in her relationships to them; in fact, one of the strengths Jen identified in Frida's
teaching was that Frida “took her students’ opinions into account” (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4]). But while Jen continued to assert her position in increasingly passionate ways in the last scenario until a class vote brought the situation to a conclusion she found satisfactory, in this instance, her assertions of authority were stymied by her awareness of institutional structure and a concern that Frida’s displeasure with Jen’s behavior might be reflected negatively in her grade for the semester.

For the first group project, Frida assigned the students in groups of four or five to prepare a 3-minute tutorial and accompanying quick reference card (QRC) on a “tip” for using a program such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, PageMaker, or PhotoShop. Most of the groups chose one or two specific tips to teach the class, but Jen’s group developed five tips along with some information about common error messages people receive when making equations in Excel.

Frida promised to make photocopies of any QRCs that groups submitted via email by noon on the day before the assignment was due. Jen’s group assigned Madison, who would be absent on the day of the tutorial, to finalize and send the QRC to Frida to have copies made. Late in the night before the tutorial presentations, Frida sent an email to the class asking the groups to resend their QRCs because she would not be able to access them from the university server. Assuming Frida had already received the QRC from Madison several days earlier, Jen re-sent Frida the QRCs accompanied by the following message:

To: Frida Ortega
From: Jen A...
Date: Tuesday, September 17, 2002 11:23 AM
Subject: Group 3 QRC

Ms. Ortega,
I wasn’t sure which email address to send these to, so I sent them to both.
Attached are the QRC and the sample grade sheet that we need to use during our tutorial.

Thanks,
Jen A…

Frida had printed the QRCs she had received the previous day at work. She had no record of having received a QRC from Jen’s group prior to Tuesday morning and was not able to print the group’s QRC from the university. Instead, she sent the following response to Jen.
To: Jen A...
From: Frida Ortega
Date: Tuesday, September 17, 2002 11:44 AM
Subject: Re: Group 3 QRC

Thanks, Jen, for the Excel files. I have added both to the Section XX discussion folder. However, I will not be able to provide copies to the class as the deadline for anyone to get their originals to me was Monday, before noon.

If you can make copies for the class prior to meeting, that would be great.

Frida Ortega

Thirty minutes prior to the start of class and before the members of her group arrived to prepare for the tutorial presentation, Jen sent Frida a second message from a computer in the classroom. Three of the group’s members were cc’d in this email; Madison (who was responsible for sending the original QRC and who was out of town on the date of the tutorial) did not receive a copy of the message. Frida did not read the email until after the class had ended:

From: Jen
To: Frida
Cc: Bonnie; Bruce; Kevin
Sent: Tuesday, September 17, 2002 12:15 PM
Subject: Re: Group 3 QRC

Ms. Ortega,

I’m sorry, but I have neither the time nor the money to make copies of the QRC for the class. We were told that if we emailed the QRC to you by Monday, you would make copies for us. We sent you our QRC and Excel worksheet to you Thursday night. You lost these files, and then sent us an email this morning telling us that you lost them. I believe that making the copies should be your responsibility, as we did as we were told and emailed you the QRC to you before the deadline.

Jen, Bonnie, Bruce, Kevin

During the class period itself, Jen’s group experienced further difficulties when no one in the class, including Frida, was able to operate the overhead monitor the group had planned to use. Instead, the group was forced to present their work orally, which they seemed unprepared for, particularly when it came time to demonstrate the Excel equations.
Jen began the group’s presentation with the following statement: “I’d like to apologize for the randomness of this. We were going to show all this on the monitor, but there was some losing of data” (class notes 9/17/02 [p. 2]). Following the presentation, Frida praised the group for adapting to the problem: “Good recovery, and good tips. It’s important to be prepared for mistakes to happen” (ibid.). At the end of class, Jen stayed behind to speak with Frida and express concern that they might be “docked points” for the monitor problems and for not having their QRC to pass out in class. Frida assured Jen that her group would not lose points for the equipment failure and that she would provide QRCs on Thursday from all the groups who had not been able to distribute theirs in class (ibid. [p. 3]). During this conversation, Jen did not mention the email she had already sent. Tuesday evening, Frida read the message Jen sent before class and emailed this reply:

From: Frida
To: Jen
Date: Tue, 17 Sep 2002 23:06:51
Subject: Re: Group 3 QRC

Jen,

Please excuse any misunderstanding caused by my email of Tuesday morning. In fact, I did not “lose” anyone’s files at all. However, from my ISU office this morning I was unable to “access” the files sent to me by those students who wished to have me load specific materials on to the class server. It was those files I was requesting be re-sent.

I received your email with the QRC and materials to load on to the class server on Tuesday morning at 11:40 am. (See the date on your email below (from my email file) – it was left out of the copy attached to your email to us.) As far as I can tell, this was the first time I received these materials. I have checked every account I have and there is no record of a file arriving from any one in your group on Thursday as you have indicated.

Perhaps everyone in your team would be kind enough to review their own records to determine who sent the files to me and what day and time so that I can research this further? (I am getting older and maybe I am just not seeing it!) While I don’t in the least bit mind making copies of your materials for the class (as I offered today to all of those who didn’t have copies for everyone), I knew when I wrote to you this afternoon that I would not be able to make copies prior to the class meeting today. It was for today’s class only that I suggested that “if you can make copies... that would be great.” It was not a requirement.

I hope that this clarifies the events that occurred today and that we can determine what exactly did happen to the files your group sent to me on
Thursday. (By the way, I do not delete any student emails for a year, beginning with the first correspondence at the start of the semester. If any correspondence has been misdirected, I definitely want to find out what went wrong.)

On another note, if you are willing, I would like to share this trail of emails with my classes to help everyone explore further how critical email is as a form of communication. While I am sure that the tone of your email below was not intentionally curt, it does seem to have been written in anger or frustration (understandable!). My own email was brief and perhaps not entirely clear as I wrote it in a hurry, hoping to reach you in time for making copies. I see this as an excellent example of how easily email correspondence can be misinterpreted by a reader and then lead to further misunderstandings - just like the childhood game of telephone. The fact that you copied everyone in your group on this email also illustrates the concept of “reach” as we discussed in class on Thursday – did your team mates have any idea what was going on? I suspect not, and now each of them has arrived at their own perhaps incorrect conclusions about who did what and who didn’t. I think it would be a great “real-life” example of communications but I will defer to your decision on whether or not to share it.

Thank you for your patience, Jen. We are all doing our best here, in spite of the usual misunderstandings and snafus along the way. I will be bringing copies of ALL the missing QRCs to class on Thursday.

Frida Ortega

Jen did not reply to Frida’s final email, nor did she bring up that email to Frida on Thursday’s class. During class, however, Jen seemed to seesaw between her anger with Frida for the problems involving the QRC and her desire to maintain positive one-on-one relations and to participate in the activities and discussions of the class. Frida and Jen arrived for class early Thursday and went to find the new classroom together. Frida felt their conversation went well (Frida interview 9/19/02 [p. 1]), and Jen seemed to be in a good mood and selected a seat at the front of the classroom closest to Frida’s desk. However, when Madison arrived for class, Jen began audibly discussing the situation with her and how upset she was about it. In one conversation with her new small group, for example, I recorded the following exchange:

Jen: Our presentation was terrible. She neglected to tell the class she didn’t know how to work the monitor. We had our presentation meticulously planned out.

Madison: Yeah. Everything was on there.
Bob: When we saw your group go, we were freaking out [his group also planned to use the monitor].

Madison: I can’t believe she didn’t get that email. She responded to me on Thursday and said she would take care of it. And how did she expect everyone to respond to an email she sent at 12:46 a.m. on Tuesday?

Jen: I’ll print that email response I got on Tuesday for you. I’m really mad about that. I missed my 11 o’clock class on Tuesday to retype [the QRC], and the professor went over stuff that wasn’t in the book but was on the test I took today. (class notes 9/19/02 [p. 6])

Despite Jen’s continued frustration, during class she actively asserted authority that supported Frida’s—e.g., using her knowledge of the textbook assignment to respond to more of Frida’s test questions than anyone else and sharing her knowledge of world politics while joining with Frida to commiserate about privacy laws in the U.S. vs. Europe. During small group work, she facilitated her group effectively, encouraging the group to cover all the topics Frida asked them to discuss.

At the end of the class period, Frida made the rare authoritative move of reprimanding the students for packing their materials before the class period ended: “Can we have quiet for a few more minutes? I still have 8 minutes with you guys” (ibid. [p. 8]). This was one of the few times in the first part of the semester that she explicitly invoked her status as instructor, and after class, Frida told me that what really frustrated her and caused her to make this uncharacteristic move was her upset at Jen, who was sitting near the front. Frida characterized Jen’s packing up as a challenge to Frida’s authority (Frida interview 9/19/02 [p. 1]). In addition, Frida told me she had overheard Jen’s complaints to Madison and the rest of the small group and was frustrated that Jen would be so cordial one-on-one before while continuing to be so angry.

The issue of packing up to leave before class had been officially dismissed came up several times during the semester between Jen and Frida. Jen had a class on the opposite side of campus immediately following technical communication, and she would often start packing her bag or even leave the room if Frida’s class ran long. Jen did tell Frida on the first day of the semester that there might be days when she had to leave early to make her next class but never mentioned it again, and with all that went on during the first day, Frida did not remember this conversation and sometimes thought Jen was packing her bag as a way to show disinterest or disrespect in the class.
The interaction described here provides several examples of the complex ways Jen and Frida negotiated their authority relationship. Jen seemed to fluctuate between clear and even angry assertions of authority and a sense that she should maintain a more traditional student role. This situation suggests the difficult position students face in an institutional setting that does not grant them much power in their authority relations with instructors. Below I discuss several features of Jen and Frida’s communication in this scenario followed by consideration of the seeming contradictions in their interactions with one another.

Features of Jen and Frida’s Communication

As in the first scenario, Jen and Frida make a number of authority moves through their writing. First, in Jen’s second email, she asserts direct authority in her relationship to Frida by stating that Frida has lost the assignment and by telling Frida what her responsibility is to the group. Also, her decision to cc the majority of her group members and to sign their names to the message can be viewed as an attempt to assert greater authority by increasing the reach of their communication and by implying the support of others in her statement.

Frida responds to this email from Jen with authority moves of her own. She puts Jen’s statement that Frida lost the emails in quotations, seemingly to imply that Jen’s claims are incorrect; later, she corrects what she called Jen’s “misinterpretation” by quoting her own reply to Jen and by giving additional facts of the situation, such as the time at which Jen’s email arrived, the lack of email from members of the group, etc. In the third paragraph, she underlines two phrases for emphasis. Frida ends the note with a long paragraph turning the conversation into a “teachable moment” in which she instructs Jen about her tone and the problems of cc’ing the email to other group members. In addition, although Frida notably makes a decision not to cc those students who received the email Jen sent, the possibility that Frida presents to Jen at the end of the email—“if you are willing, I would like to share this trail of emails with my classes to help everyone explore further how critical email is as a form of communication”—implies that the potential to increase the reach of their communication also exists for Frida. It is possible that having her email used as an example of unsuccessful communication would be embarrassing for Jen and could, therefore, act as an incentive for Jen to avoid cc’ing other group members in future emails.
Frida’s authoritative tone is tempered somewhat by her statement in the third paragraph that she is willing to consider that the error might be hers. In addition, she does not make the decision to share the email with the class on her own (which as an instructor, she might have done) but leaves the choice to Jen. Finally, she begins and ends with statements of goodwill: “please excuse any misunderstanding caused by my email of Tuesday morning” and “Thank you for your patience, Jen. We are all doing our best here, in spite of the usual misunderstandings and snafus along the way. I will be bringing copies of ALL the missing QRCs to class on Thursday,” including an agreement to make the copies that Jen requested. So while Frida did make deliberate authority moves in her response, she also left room in her claims for Jen to continue asserting some authority—e.g., by providing Frida with more information, by agreeing to or declining Frida’s request to show the email to the class. While I believe that Frida’s letter remains a strong authority move despite these concessions, what these elements of the letter do is leave open some possibility for congenial relationship and continued authority negotiation.

**Understanding Jen’s Authority Moves**

Early in the exchange, Jen seemed to express herself freely, perhaps due to her belief that she was in the right and her sense that as a competent adult, she could speak her position honestly to Frida. Quickly, however, Jen’s assertions of authority changed. Although comments to her small group revealed that she did still believe her view of the situation was the correct one, she did not raise the topic again with Frida either in email or in class discussion. I credit this contradiction in her behavior, in part, to her recognition of the institutional structure I discussed in Chapter 4; in this instance, Jen believed her grade on a particular assignment could be affected by the situation. Throughout the semester, Jen made deliberate behavioral decisions based on her goal to earn an “A” in the course, a goal she identified as crucial to her plans to be admitted to a top Ph.D. program (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 8]). Following the semester, she discussed two specific ways her perceptions about the university system influenced her behavior in the class:

\[\text{Jen:} \quad \text{When I was frustrated over her grading or extending the assignments, then I wasn’t very honest because... I didn’t want to make her upset at me. I wanted her to like me because I felt like if she liked me, she’d give me a better grade.} \quad \text{(Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4])}\]
Jen: If I’m in a class that promotes discussion, I try to talk. Because if a teacher’s promoting discussion, there’s a good chance they’re grading partially on how much you talk in class. So I’ll do anything to get brownie points with the teacher because if you’re on the borderline, B+/A-, and the teacher remembers, “Oh, you talked a lot in class,” they’ll bump you up. So I guess a lot of times when I’m trying to talk, it’s for the grade. (ibid. [p. 9])

In my observation of the class, I did not discover evidence to support Jen’s belief that she would receive a higher grade if she got along with Frida. In fact, although Frida sometimes expressed frustration with Jen and what she perceived as Jen’s negative impact on the class environment, she continued to identify Jen as one of the strongest students in the class, whom she could count on to submit “top notch” work for every assignment (Frida interview 9/30/02 [p. 2]). What appeared to be constraining Jen’s behavior, then, was not actual threats from Frida to Jen’s success in the class, but Jen’s perception that such threats existed, probably stemming from her tacit awareness of the discursive structure of the university. As a result, when Frida made authority moves in her email response to Jen that did not seem supportive of Jen’s assertions of authority, Jen backed off.

So Jen was constrained, on the one hand, by her need to adhere to her institutionally defined student role, and on the other by her view of herself as a competent adult with academic and professional expertise of her own. The result seemed to be contradictions in her assertions of authority. One feature of that contradiction was that Jen appeared to separate her assertions of authority that contradicted Frida’s in one class period from her desire and need to assert authority that complemented Frida’s in the next class period. In Chapter 4, I discussed the students’ tendency to engage in a form of underlife, where they declined to participate actively in in-class activities or discussions when they were frustrated with Frida or the class; Jen, however, did not engage in this type of behavior. Although her audible conversations with classmates and her written communication might be considered an alternative form of underlife, Jen did not disengage from the course as a whole and she continued to seek out interaction with Frida.44

44 In some ways, Jen’s form of underlife—complaining audibly about the class—was riskier than simply refusing to participate in a class discussion or activity. When students in Frida’s class did not participate in class discussions, she could not point to one student or behavior in particular as disruptive. Frida could, however, identify Jen as a specific negative influence based on Jen’s comments to other students in the class.
Written vs. Oral Authority Moves

In addition to separating her frustration from her continued participation in the class, Jen appeared to be more comfortable making authority moves in writing rather than in face-to-face communication. In discussion with Frida, she maintained a friendly tone and was more likely to cede to Frida’s authority—expressing concern about the group’s grade, for instance. Frida, too, made most of her overt authority moves by email, maintaining in class the informal, open-for-debate classroom atmosphere that she believed made a class successful (Frida interview 8/27/02 [p. 1]). I speculate that there may be several reasons for these different assertions based on media. First, as I discussed in Chapter 4, Frida’s status as a lecturer left her little time for one-on-one conferences. Following Jen’s class, Frida typically had to return to Midwest Trust for afternoon meetings, which did not leave much time for in-depth discussions. But Frida and Jen did speak before and after class on several occasions, so lack of time cannot completely explain this pattern to their authority assertions. A second reason may be that neither Frida nor Jen felt particularly comfortable sharing their authority negotiations in front of others in the class (possibly including me). Both women reacted negatively when they believed the other was expanding the reach of the communication. By asserting authority via email, Jen and Frida could count on a relative amount of privacy. Finally, I speculate that it was important for both Jen and Frida to maintain a positive (i.e., friendly, non-argumentative) relationship within the class itself. Jen claimed that she wanted Frida to like her and that she tried to mirror the behaviors Frida wanted (e.g., participating in discussion) while in class. Frida, on the other hand, preferred to facilitate an informal classroom atmosphere where students could argue with her ideas (Frida interview 8/27/02 [p. 1]), which meant that she often chose to make her more authoritative moves in writing, moving them outside of direct classroom interaction.

Whatever their reasons for altering their authority moves depending on the media, it is interesting to note that both women struggled to understand this behavior in the other. To Frida, Jen’s polite, engaged behavior face-to-face as opposed to the frustration she revealed via email and in peer groups seemed frustrating and challenging (Frida interview 9/19/02 [p. 1]). As the instructor, Frida wanted to address the situation of Jen’s anger and—what Frida viewed as—problematic behavior completely and then move on with the course. Jen,
meanwhile, claimed that Frida sometimes seemed to want Jen to be honest, but other times, Frida discouraged Jen’s honesty via email (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 4]). Jen and Frida’s frustration with one another demonstrates that while instructors and students might be acutely aware of the discursive structures influencing their own behaviors, it may be difficult for them to recognize another’s authority moves as deliberate choices rather than merely as frustrating contradictions.

Looking at this interaction between Jen and Frida highlights the complicated position students are in when they believe in their own expertise and authority but are concerned about their freedom to assert that authority within a classroom context that supports an instructor’s power over students in the form of grades in the course. Those students who are strongly influenced by discourses about the importance of academic success may feel more compelled than other students to assert authority in the classroom but may feel even more constrained in the forms those authority assertions can take.

In both of the scenarios I have included here, the authority relationship between Jen and Frida was complicated by the discursive structures influencing the instructor-student relationship and disagreement about the ways a class should proceed. At the same time, internal contradictions in both Jen and Frida’s perceptions of the class—particularly between expertise and institutional structure—increased this complexity. As Jen and Frida negotiated their authority throughout the semester, institutional structure and practices continued to shape their interaction, most notably in terms of the constraints it placed on each of them as they tried to determine their role in the classroom.

Although Jen and Frida negotiated some crucial aspects of their authority in writing, they also frequently engaged one another—in positive and negative ways—in class. Because a significant portion of their authority negotiation took place in front of the class as a whole, Jen and Frida’s instructor-student relationship impacted Jen’s relationships of authority with other students as well. In the next section, I discuss the various ways in which Jen negotiated authority with other students in the class.
JEN AND THE CLASS: STUDENT-STUDENT AUTHORITY

In addition to her complex relationship of authority with Frida, Jen also engaged in complex authority relationships with her fellow students resulting, in part, from contradictory discursive structures influencing student-student authority relationships. In the last chapter, I identified two structures that discouraged students from asserting effective authority over one another in collaborative situations: (1) an assumption that student-student relationships should be socially-based and non-hierarchical, and (2) a focus in western education on individual academic achievement, independent of, and often in competition with, other students. As I discussed, students found a variety of means for successfully working together despite these constraints, but doing so sometimes meant sacrificing something else—whether that be efficiency, the possibility of friendship, or some degree of academic success.

Throughout the semester, Jen faced these same choices during whole-class discussions and with each group activity and assignment. Although Jen’s first tendency seemed to be to secure her own academic success even if that meant violating social constraints in her relationships with other students, she adapted to different group dynamics, particularly in her work with her primary small group, with whom she completed three projects.

Whole-Class and Brief Small Group Activities

During the semester, Jen claimed to me and Frida that she did not particularly enjoy student-student group work, but she knew it was an important skill to practice for her future career as a researcher in nuclear engineering (e.g., Jen conference 10/8/02 [p. 2]). Jen acknowledged that she had a tendency to be “bossy” in a group and tell others what to do (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 12]). She explained this tendency by discussing again her primary focus on achieving individual success in the class (an important goal, given her desire to attend a highly competitive Ph.D. program in nuclear engineering): “My main goal is just to do good work, and if I don’t think other people will do that work, then I’ll step forward and do it” (ibid. [p. 9]). Jen’s approach meant that there were times in the class when she did not adhere to the socially-based structures of student-student authority relationships. For example, when Jen presented a software tutorial with her first small group, she took over the presentation when she felt one member was not conveying the group’s point effectively (ibid.
Another example was Jen’s participation in class discussions: many students are often reluctant to respond to instructors’ questions in the classroom, particularly if the student has just responded to a previous question or if responding may result in correcting another student’s answer; perhaps this is because to do so appears to be an effort to raise oneself in the eyes of the instructor at the expense of other students. Jen, however, did not adhere to this social constraint. Typically, she was the primary respondent in class, and often, the fact that she had studied the class material extensively meant that she was the only student able (or willing) to provide informed answers on oral quizzes or to Frida’s questions during class discussions. As with many of the decisions she made in her authority relationship with Frida, Jen was aware of the motives influencing her participation and the possible consequences of that decision in terms of her relationship with other students:

If I’m in a class that promotes discussion, I try to talk. Because if a teacher’s promoting discussion, there’s a good chance they’re grading partially on how much you talk in class. So I’ll do anything to get brownie points with the teacher because if you’re on the borderline, B+/A-, and the teacher remembers, “Oh, you talked a lot in class,” they’ll bump you up. So I guess a lot of times when I’m trying to talk, it’s for the grade.

But I can understand [other students] saying I was dominating. I tend to do that in class, especially if people aren’t talking. I hate sitting there in silence. I’ll talk every time if nobody else says anything. If I know the answer, I’m going to say it. Even in my Econ class—it’s a huge lecture—but the professor would ask a question, a really easy thing, pause and wait for somebody to answer. I’d sit there waiting because it was easy, and then I’d blurt out the answer. And it happened over and over again. (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 9])

Jen conceded that her desire to be successful in the class and her own grasp of the material combined with her frustration over others’ reluctance or lack of preparation led her to violate the social constraint of classroom participation. She recognized, also, that other students might view this behavior as “dominating,” but for Jen, this was a sacrifice she was willing to make in order to maintain a particular instructor-student relationship and keep the class discussion moving.

45 Jen saw this moment in the class differently than I did. Due to technical problems, the group spreadsheet had been hastily recreated the morning of the presentation. The teammate whom Jen “interrupted” was unfamiliar with the new visual, and Jen saw her decision to step in as an act of team solidarity to help a group member who was flustered and uncomfortable (Jen email 3/28/04).
The negative consequences Jen identified did, in fact, occur to some degree. Many of the students in the class recognized Jen as a clear authority among the students, but often they viewed this authority in negative terms. In the final survey of the semester, for example, (see Appendix B, survey #4), I asked respondents to identify what student or students had the greatest authority in the class. Fourteen people identified one or more specific people as an authority, and of those fourteen, eight identified Jen as a primary authority (no other person was identified more than twice). However, the majority of the students’ characterizations of Jen as an authority contained at least some negative elements; for example, one student called Jen “dominating,” and another said “she is loud and always thinks she’s right.” Some students reacted to their perception of Jen’s authoritative role in the class by removing social support within the classroom. As a result, some students declined to work with Jen or made negative statements about her in class or to other class members. On one occasion, for example, Sam warned six classmates against working with Jen on a collaborative project: “I wouldn’t want to be in that group. [Jen] would be psycho to work with” (class notes 9/12/02 [p. 6]). And although students later identified Jen’s group as the most harmonious and social, they still assumed that Jen must be “cracking the whip” over her group members (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 7, 8]).

On another occasion, some students demonstrated that they perceived Jen’s focus on individual academic success as a sign that she was generally untrustworthy to fellow students. Frida had a representative from Midwest Trust come do an exercise with the class that involved four different groups trying to make decisions that might result in one or more groups winning money at the expense of others or might result in all four groups winning or losing money. When one group double-crossed the others by voting one way after promising to vote another, they claimed to have done so because they assumed Jen would try to cheat them (class notes 10/24/02 [p. 6]), even though Jen and her group had shown no signs of doing so. Jen, in fact, had been the primary force behind encouraging groups to make choices that resulted in all groups winning money, and in one instance, had even convinced her group to “sacrifice” money to encourage other groups to do the same. Despite Jen’s vocal statements to the class that if they didn’t all work together they would all lose money, students in other groups still mistrusted her. This idea that Jen’s decision to focus on
academic success by exceeding an instructor’s goals for student performance was akin to a rejection of the student-student bond was one that came up several times during the semester. At times, Jen’s behavior contributed to the perception that she was not interested in maintaining the student-student bond. Jen believed that the instructor of a course should be the primary expert (i.e., “the main giver of knowledge”), so she did not look to other students to contribute to her learning or academic success until they demonstrated an ability to do so. In addition, Jen’s confidence in her own expertise sometimes led her to believe that her own contributions and responses were superior to those of classmates. On one occasion, Frida placed the students in groups of three for a two-day, in-class activity; on the first day, the students created reading guides to accompany different sections of the online textbook, and on the second day, they reviewed the guides other groups had made. Jen assumed clear leadership in her group, making almost all decisions and making a high number of directive comments to the two men in her group, such as “Write on the back that we think the subject is fine” (class notes 11/7/02 [p. 4]). At the same time, Jen audibly disagreed (in ways that could be construed as disparaging) with other groups’ writing and feedback decisions:

This looks like they just ran out of time in the middle. Why would they do that? If they were out of time, why not just delete that section? The rest of us were working on different sections, so we wouldn’t even have known. (ibid.)

This is the most specific one so far. I don’t know where [the first group to provide feedback] thinks the writers should have been more specific. Write on the back that we think the subject line is fine. Screw you guys! (ibid.)

Jen’s comments were audible from across the classroom, and I noticed several students watching Jen while she talked and muttering comments of their own to one another. Jen also left a negative impression with her responses to peer review activities. Because Jen had great confidence in her own expertise, she did not value peer review, preferring instead to conserve her time by working on her own projects or receiving information from Frida. Jen openly shared her dislike of such activities in class. For example, in one class period, Frida asked the class to look at one another’s analyses of corporate and educational web sites; Jen’s group shared a relatively polished final project with classmates and received only comments concerning the placement of visuals from other groups. Jen’s reluctance to spend time on this activity was clear during class, and after class, she made her annoyance clear:
From Jen’s perspective, she wanted to express her dislike of such activities to let Frida know she did not find them a good use of the class' time (Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 3]), but from the perspective of other students in the class, particularly those who had peer reviewed Jen’s group’s work, statements such as the one above could be considered a direct statement against their abilities.

Jen was not insensitive to the comments from other students; in fact, she identified herself in a negative light on several occasions when discussing her performance in group work, saying she could understand why other students thought she was dominating and commenting to me that she believed she should learn to be less “bossy” and “stubborn” in groups (ibid. [p. 12]). Jen’s recognition of the ways she might be perceived by other students underscores the pervasive force that academic success played in her decisions about the class; succeeding in class acted as such a powerful goal that Jen made the decision to be strongly assertive and individually-focused, despite knowing that it could result in some loss of socially-based peer relationships.

Although it could be easy to dismiss Jen as simply uncaring or selfish, to do so ignores the degree to which her dilemma was not unique. The institution and Frida (through her focus on both peer collaboration and “achieving excellence”) were asking Jen to balance two goals—academic success and positive social connections—that were not always complementary. The other students in Frida’s class—and I would argue, in many other classes—faced the same need for balance. Students do not all make the same choices for achieving this balance, and as I show in the next section, Jen, herself, made different choices in the same class later in the semester.

**Small Group Assignments**

As I mentioned above, Jen’s preferred style of work was to concentrate on her own academic success, and in many student-student settings that focus may have involved being
“bossy” or doing the work that she did not think other group members would or could do well. Her work with her primary small group, however, was, for the most part, an exception to this rule as the group maintained a strong social component and did not declare a leader. In this instance, Jen was able to successfully balance individual academic success and socially-based peer relationships, although even here, achieving that balance had consequences of its own.

Collaborative projects were the norm in Frida’s class, with four of the six primary assignments including some level of significant group work. As a class, the students were placed in five groups for the first collaborative project: a software tutorial and quick reference card. After that assignment, the groups were re-formed based on the students’ varying work styles. With only a few exceptions, these new groups remained intact through the end of the semester. Jen was matched with Bob, Dustin, and Madison, and from early in their interaction, this group was marked by communication unlike that occurring in the majority of the other groups or in Jen’s typical collaborations.

In Chapter 5, I used transcripts from Jen’s group as an example of effective collaborative sequences, peer work discussions in which group members participate more or less equally and no one member assumes a leadership role. In addition, the group maintained a strong social component by sharing aspects of their lives outside of the class and making plans to socialize with one another. For Jen, this experience was unusual as she was accustomed to assuming the leader role in collaborative projects (ibid. [p. 12]). I believe that two factors made it possible for Jen to interact with her group members in a non-hierarchical, socially-based manner: first, Madison shared Jen’s focus on achieving academic success in the class and early in their first group project together came to class with a well-written first draft of the group’s memo already prepared. Through actions such as this, Madison demonstrated to Jen that she had expertise of her own to contribute. Following the semester, Jen spoke about Madison’s contributions and the level of trust she came to place in Madison’s opinions and ability to produce high-quality work (ibid. [p. 5]). It seemed, therefore, that because Madison shared a discourse with Jen concerning the value of individual academic success and because she demonstrated a form of expertise that Jen found valuable, Jen became more willing to cede authority to her.
A second factor leading Jen to engage in a different student-student authority relationship with this group was Bob’s refusal to accept other group members' decisions without discussion, which forced Jen to slow down, justify her own ideas, and listen to other people's ideas. Following the semester, Jen discussed the impact this had on her participation in the group:

Right at the beginning, Bob and I kind of butted heads because we’re both very stubborn people. But we ended up just sort of declaring an unspoken truce, and after that, I was really able to say, “Here’s what I think should happen,” and then take other people’s ideas and incorporate into them. So in my group, I felt like... people would listen to me and let me say my ideas. But at the same time, I got away from saying, “This is the way it’s going to be,” which is good because I needed to not be like that. I’d definitely say I enjoyed a lot of the group work in the end more so than anything I’m doing now [in group work in engineering classes]. (ibid. [p. 6])

I discussed in Chapter 5 some of the methods students used for disciplining those students who violated the expected socially-based, non-hierarchical nature of the peer relationship, and in the previous section, I demonstrated how some students removed social support from Jen based on her assertiveness in the large group. One sign of the difference between this group and the majority of group settings Jen may have found herself in was that on the few occasions when she reverted to trying to assert her authority over the rest of the group, she was met with resistance, and her group members seemed engaged in subtle discipline. On one occasion, for example, Jen arrived at class already in a bad mood. When it came time for the class to sign up for presentation dates, Jen was adamant about wanting to present on the second day. Unfortunately, there were four groups who wanted the same day and only two slots available. Jen’s group attempted to discuss the situation, but Jen was unwilling to compromise and instead insisted “I want the 5th!” Dustin acted as spokesperson for the group and ultimately selected the last day of presentations instead. After Jen left class, the rest of her group remained behind and discussed how to handle the situation and Jen’s behavior (class notes 11/21/03 [p. 6]). Madison, Bob, and Dustin decided to talk with Jen at their next group meeting. This meeting took place outside of class, and I was not privy to what (if anything) was ultimately said; however, beginning with the next class period, Jen no longer made further audible complaints about the presentation date. The group’s reaction to Jen’s attempt to dominate and their swift moves to combat it seemed to demonstrate not
only that such behavior was rare from Jen within the context of the group, but also that the dynamic of the group itself would not permit such behavior to continue.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the difficulty students face when trying to assert authority over one another in positive ways within the peer relationship because the primary discursive structures influencing students' relationships often contradict one another. Students may find they must sacrifice some degree of either individual academic success or social engagement. Here I have characterized the collaborative experience of Jen's group as one in which the students maintained a non-hierarchical, socially based interaction while achieving high academic success; however, Jen did still have to make sacrifices in this student-student relationship. But rather than sacrifice individual academic success, which was of great importance to her (and Madison), she sacrificed some efficiency in completing the projects. During the semester and in conversation with me, Jen often expressed concerns about the value of her time. One of the main components of her argument against doing homework exercises, for example, was that it wasted students' valuable time (Jen email to class 9/3/02). Similarly, she believed many in-class small group activities took up time that could have been better spent working on major assignments (class notes 11/19/02 [p. 4]; Jen interview 1/31/03 [p. 3]). But within the context of her group work with Madison, Bob, and Dustin, Jen sacrificed the efficiency that might have come from taking a leader role and making decisions on behalf of the group instead of negotiating each decision amongst four people. When Frida gave the students time to work in groups, the other five groups seemed to spend only a few minutes talking and then began to construct text or left for the day. Jen's group, on the other hand, typically spent all available time talking about decisions the group needed to make and accomplished very little of their actual writing in class. As a result, the majority of their projects were completed outside of class. In addition, they were almost always the last group still working in the room at the end of the class period. A portion of this time was spent on conversations unrelated to the project, such as plans for the weekend, anecdotes about other classes or jobs, etc., which allowed the group to maintain a social aspect to their relationship and which resulted in all four group members reporting that they actually enjoyed much of the time spent in their group. Jen, for example, said she planned to stay in contact with Madison, Bob, and Dustin beyond the conclusion of the class (Jen interview
1/31/03 [p. 12]). But even with the off-topic conversations, the group spent more time actually discussing the project than the other groups seemed to. Although Jen sometimes wished that Frida would provide the class with even more in-class work time, she did not seek to alter the group’s work style even though it slowed the writing process significantly. Instead, she stated that working with the group had been a good experience for her because she was learning how to collaborate more effectively instead of trying to make everyone else do things the way she wanted them done.

For Jen, then, it seemed that this group provided a way for her to achieve her class goal of individual academic success while providing her with a model for collaboration that seemed to be more productive for her anticipated future collaborations with peers in graduate school and in her career. In this instance, then, Jen was willing to sacrifice some efficiency in order to achieve these two greater benefits.

Jen’s experiences in large and small group work demonstrate the challenging balance students are asked to maintain in student-student relationships and some of the obstacles and possibilities for making such relationships positive and productive. In Jen’s case, authority relationships with other students were complicated by her decision to focus on individual academic success, just as this same focus often led her to maintain a traditional instructor-student authority relationship despite her preference for a less hierarchical interaction. In large part, her concern with achieving individual success meant that she chose to invest more effort in her authority relationship with Frida than with other students in the class. Within the context of her small group, however, Jen was able to engage in successful collaboration that both affirmed her desire for success in the class and allowed her to maintain positive, non-hierarchical relations with other students. Jen considered this collaboration a positive learning experience, but one that could not always be repeated, as it required group members who were as committed to academic success as she was and held expertise that could contribute to completing the project effectively.

**Gender Effects on Jen’s Authority Relationships**

A number of discursive structures influenced Jen’s authority relationships with Frida and with other students throughout the course of the semester. In the previous sections, I
have discussed the ways that institutional status, perceptions of expertise, and discourses about the nature of academic success constrained and enabled Jen as she made choices about when and how to assert authority in the class. Other structures more difficult to isolate also act on authority relationships, as I have discussed in Chapter 4. In the case of Jen, the only female engineering student in a class that included 13 students from the College of Engineering, the structure of gender seemed to play a role at several points during the semester. Importantly, Jen’s own behavior and academic success did not adhere to gender expectations according to traditional views of masculine and feminine communication. At the same time, however, the perceptions other students and Frida held of Jen’s behavior did reflect gender-based influences.

For more than 20 years, a large body of research has been devoted to defining and testing masculine and feminine ways of communicating. Beginning with landmark works by Belenky, et al. and Chodorow, this type of feminist research spread to communication fields such as speech (e.g., Tannen), composition (e.g., Gearhart; Jarratt, “Feminism...”; Gabriel and Smithson), and finally, technical communication (e.g., Lay, Flynn). Much of this research argues that—due to biology or social construction—women are more likely to use communication to forge connections and to avoid conflict. As a result, women may be more adept collaborators but may also find it more difficult to succeed in academia, which values a more agonistic style of debate. In my study, Frida expressed a similar understanding of male and female forms of participation from her experiences teaching technical communication:

The classes tend to be male-dominated to start out with. So it’s really hard to draw the females out.... They’ve been dominated by the males in their engineering classes all along, and they’ve had a tough road. And some of them, I think, “Oh my god. You’re so much brighter than these boys. Why aren’t you more assertive? Why aren’t you more confident in yourself?”

I probably have a better rapport with the boys in class because they’re more outspoken. They’re more likely to joke back. But I have a better rapport with the girls on a personal level. So with the females, connection tends to take place on an individual basis. With the boys, there are clowns, there are leaders, and there are outspoken types who tend to dominate.... But I think it’s a rare female student who will really take a strong assertive role in the class. They even sit together (Frida interview 9/30/02 [p. 12, 13]
While these views of feminine ways of communicating and behaving in class have helped researchers and instructors understand underlying structural barriers to female success, the descriptions are essentialist in that they do not fit all women or men as they communicate. More recently, researchers in the fields of engineering and technical communication have begun questioning essentialist views of gendered communication by looking at the patterns of female engineering students in peer work groups. Sandra Ingram and Anne Parker, for example, found evidence of female engineering students who challenged traditional views that females are dominated by males in work groups, even while these women used communication tactics that might be considered feminine in order to accomplish their goals within the group. Similarly, Mary-Ellen Cummings and Isabelle Thompson discuss the example of a female engineering student in a technical communication class who did not adhere to traditionally feminine passive or non-confrontational roles. The student they studied took a clear leader role over the other members of the group (all male), and all members of the group acknowledged the position she held within the group.

I argue that the impact of multiple structures acting upon any given relationship combined with the range of choices available to participants means that individuals influenced by a discursive structure of gender might not adhere to gendered expectations in their authority with one another. Jen, for instance, did not fit the pattern of student behavior that Frida described to me, and like the women in these two engineering studies, Jen did not adhere to traditional gender expectations in her participation with other students. She felt comfortable assuming leadership roles among groups of students and was not, as research might suggest, particularly focused on using communication to forge connections amongst members of the class or her small groups (only in the small group she shared with Madison, Bob, and Dustin did Jen engage in socially-based, non-hierarchical peer authority, and according to Jen, this type of small-group interaction was a departure for her). Jen's experience highlights the extent to which the structure of gender does not impact all students in the same way as they assert authority with one another and with their instructors.

However, Jen did not escape the structure of gender in her assertions of authority even though she herself typically chose not to behave in traditionally feminine ways. Foucault has argued that resistance to a structure occurs from within that structure
(Archaeology 46), and others in the class continued to perceive Jen’s assertions of authority through a gendered lens. Clearly, Jen engaged in behavior that frequently brought her to the attention of the class as a whole and that could often be construed in negative ways, but she was not the only student who spoke out frequently in class. Other students were also vocal participants. In the final survey and in interviews, however, Jen was one of only two students whose authority was described in negative ways. The majority of the eight survey respondents and three of the interview participants who identified Jen as an authority used some negative terms to describe her authority, and many of these descriptions could be viewed as gendered, for example: “bitchy” and “bossy.” The authority of the outspoken males in the class, however, was characterized positively. Vince, for example, participated frequently in class discussions, often answering questions five or more times during class. In final survey comments, one student named Vince and Jen as the student authorities in the class; that student identified Vince as a “good speaker” and Jen as “annoying.” Sam took a strong leadership role in several small group activities and projects. In the final survey, members of the class (including those in his group) praised him for “keeping others organized and on task.” Jen, meanwhile, worked with a group that the class identified as the most cohesive and social, and yet one student remarked in interview that Jen must be “cracking the whip” over the men in her group, a phrase that evokes a traditionally negative image of women in relationships (Donna/Vince interview 1/30/03 [p. 7, 8]). In fact, the only other student whose authority was characterized in negative ways was another female, Adele, about whom a classmate wrote, “she’s always blabbing and can talk other people down.”

Frida also seemed to share gendered perceptions of Jen’s behavior. Although Frida lamented the lack of women willing to take a “strong assertive role in the class,” she often reacted negatively to Jen’s assertiveness. In the first half of the semester, Bob challenged Frida almost as often as Jen, although he typically chose to challenge her in front of the class as a whole (see Chapter 4, page 89 for one example) rather than in private as Jen did. And like Jen, Bob often complained audibly about the class while in his small group. However, Frida viewed Bob’s comments as a sign of his comfort in the class, while she considered Jen a negative influence. Frida seemed to interpret similar in-class behaviors differently, perhaps because Bob was playing a role that Frida had identified many men in her classes taking,
while Jen was not adhering to the role Frida expected from her female students but taking the “dominating” role Frida had defined as masculine. Part of Frida’s interpretation of Jen’s in-class behavior could be attributed to the admittedly complicated authority relationship they shared outside of class, but Bob also attempted to assert direct authority in relation to Frida (although not to the same extent as Jen). For example, when Frida returned the instructions assignments to the students with initial low grades, Bob and Jen’s group disagreed with several of the comments Frida made on their document. After class, Jen told her group she voted to make the changes Frida requested and then left to go to her next class, but Bob and Madison decided to stay after to discuss their complaints with Frida. The short excerpt below demonstrates the heated nature of the exchange:

Bob: The whole point of the assignment was to write a good set of instructions, so I don’t see how you can justify a 4 based on this stuff.
Frida: The point was to apply all the concepts of technical communication that we’ve talked about and read about.
Madison: You said the point was for us to experience how groups work.
Frida: That was for the first group assignment that was smaller. The goal here was to present a tightly produced document. (class notes 10/29/02 [p. 5])

Although Bob and Madison had been the ones to complain, Frida’s anger was with Jen, whom she believed to be the instigator of the students’ dissension: “Now she’s got the rest of her group, even Bob...being rude to me” (Frida interview 10/29/02 [p. 1]). Upon reading a draft of this chapter, Jen was surprised to learn that Frida believed Jen had been responsible for her group members’ reactions: “I actually find it surprising and kind of amusing that Ms. Ortega thought I made Bob and Madison upset. Bob was...more upset than I was over the grade we received” (Jen email 3/28/04).

I speculate that while Jen asserted authority in ways that were not identifiably feminine, other students in the class (and Frida, to a lesser degree) continued to view her through a gendered lens. Jeanne Weiland Herrick identified a similar occurrence in her study of women’s workplace communication; although a woman may not engage others according to a gendered pattern, others may read that communication through a gendered lens.

Considering the impact of discourse about gender on Jen’s authority relationships demonstrates well the extent to which discursive structures do not pre-determine the
behaviors that will occur in a local situation. Jen did not, in fact, adhere to feminine ways of communication, nor did she have to struggle in order to be successful in the course. However, Jen’s resistance to behaving according to gendered patterns occurred within the context of the larger social discourse on gender, and as a result, other members of the class continued to measure her behavior according to gendered standards. So behaviors that might have been considered confident or assertive when demonstrated by a man were considered “bossy” or negative when coming from Jen.

**CONCLUSION**

Jen experienced complicated relationships of authority with Frida and other students, in large part due to the influence that several discursive structures exerted on her. In the instructor-student relationship, she had a strong sense of her own expertise, which led her to want a more egalitarian authority relationship with Frida. In conflict with the structure of expertise was her understanding of the impact of institutional status, which led her to accept Frida’s authority moves despite disagreeing with some of them. Within the student-student relationship, Jen sometimes deliberately violated a non-hierarchical structure (particularly with those students she believed had less expertise than she) in order to focus on the instructor-student relationship she considered important to succeeding in the course academically; however, she did so at the expense of some social support from peers.

Ultimately, Jen makes an excellent subject for study because we see her actively wrestling with the effects of those discursive structures discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. While her responses to these structures were, at times, atypical, the balances she was being asked to strike—maintaining an “appropriate” student role while asserting her growing expertise to succeed in the class, achieving academic success while maintaining socially-based, non-hierarchical relationships with classmates, managing her time in Frida’s course with time in other courses—were not unique. All the students in Frida’s class and, I would argue, in many other technical communication classes, faced these same challenges. Jen’s atypical responses to such challenges sometimes led to conflict in the instructor-student or student-student relationships. But rather than viewing this conflict as the result of a “disgruntled” or “troubemaking” student, we can view it as an important moment of Foucauldian rupture that highlights the kind of classroom authority negotiation that goes unrecognized until disrupted.
Chapter 7: Implications for Writing Classroom Teaching and Research

Throughout this dissertation, I have identified patterns in the authority assertions of instructors and students from two technical communication classes to begin building a framework for understanding the formation and negotiation of classroom authority relationships. This research was predicated on the belief that instructor-student and student-student authority relationships are shaped by external discursive structures (such as institutional practice, beliefs about disciplinary expertise, and gender) that are always already present prior to a given event or relationship. My definition of authority, which is influenced by post-structuralists (Foucault, Giddens, and de Certeau) as well as a number of composition theorists, had four elements important to the study of writing classroom authority relationships:

- **Authority is discursively structured and locally manifested.** Classroom relationships of authority are shaped by the structures and practices that pre-exist the specific instance of a course, but within that context, instructors and students actively make choices that manifest authority relationships in particular ways.

- **Authority is negotiated.** Although higher education institutions grant instructors relatively greater power than students, both instructors and students are active agents in the classroom, making choices that impact authority relationships.

- **Multiple, (sometimes) contradictory structures impact authority.** Institutional structures and practices are not the only influences on classroom authority. Authority relationships are also shaped by disciplinary expertise, gender, sexuality, race, etc.

- **Authority has both positive and negative effects.** Although a typical view of authority might present instructors benefiting from institutional structures and practices while students are constrained, discursive structures shape relationships in ways that are positive and negative for everyone involved.

Considering these four characteristics of authority relationships leads to deeper understanding of the complex nature of classroom authority and highlights the need for studying classroom authority in context in order to identify key patterns.

Through the course of my research, I have identified several such patterns in the instructor-student and student-student relationships in my study, which are outlined in Figure
7.1 and the sections that follow. In this chapter, I begin by highlighting key findings from my study. I then discuss two research-based implications of those findings: my dissertation (1) introduces the topic of classroom authority to the field of professional communication, and (2) focuses attention on the importance of student-student classroom authority in writing-related fields, including composition studies. In the last section, I briefly examine some implications this dissertation has for teaching in writing classrooms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor-student classroom authority</th>
<th>Student-student classroom authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heavily shaped by institutional practices that place the instructor in a hierarchical position of authority over students</td>
<td>Undefined by institutional practices, leaving students to develop their own patterns of authority relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Already defined structures allow instructors and students to quickly begin work of semester</td>
<td>Undefined structures force students to determine each time how groups will function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constrained by institutional practices that permeate diverse aspects of the instructor-student relationship from grading to classroom architecture</td>
<td>Constrained by western academia's focus on (1) individual academic success and (2) the need for socially-based, non-hierarchical student-student relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed and maintained by both instructors and students, although instructors often have more control over the outcome</td>
<td>Developed and maintained by leaders and followers within a group with neither having inherently more control over the outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are negotiated orally and in writing</td>
<td>Are negotiated most often orally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors have significant resources to draw upon for disciplining students who do not adhere to instructor's preferred relationship of authority; students have significantly fewer resources to constrain the relationship</td>
<td>Students have relatively few resources to discipline one another for transgressing the student-student relationship; available resources include withdrawal of social and academic support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary expertise provides resources for upsetting traditional instructor-student authority relationships as defined by institutional practices</td>
<td>Disciplinary expertise provides resources for asserting authority without upsetting the non-hierarchical student-student relationships defined by institutional practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenced by other discursive structures such as gender, sexuality, race, etc.</td>
<td>Influenced by other discursive structures such as gender, sexuality, race, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 7.1 - Comparison between instructor-student & student-student authority relationships
INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT AUTHORITY

Although classroom authority relationships have not received significant attention in professional communication, the related field of composition studies has produced a large body of literature devoted to instructor-student authority. A limitation on some of this research is that it relies on an under-theorized understanding of authority as (1) an “object” that can be passed from person to person or held by a single person and that can be equated to institutional status, and (2) inherently negative, particularly for students. These assumptions are at odds with the more fully theorized description of authority I outlined in Chapter 2 and summarized in the introduction to this chapter. Therefore, this dissertation meets a need for an in-depth study of the nature of instructor-student authority.

Based on my observations of two technical writing classrooms over the course of a semester, I agree with the many composition scholars who argue that institutional structures and practices shape instructor-student authority. Institutional influence could be seen in a wide range of occurrences such as students’ immediate initial acceptance of the instructors’ plans for the course and the instructors’ attempts to balance their assigned grader roles with other pedagogical goals. Often, institutional structure acted to constrain the instructors and students in my study by reinforcing a traditionally hierarchical relationship. For example, students were less likely to assert authority in the instructor-student relationship when they considered the institutional practice that gave the instructor power over the students’ success in the course. And the instructors, like many instructors in rhetorical fields who wish to embrace feminist, egalitarian pedagogical modes, found that the strategies they used to resist traditional authority relationships simultaneously reinforced their authority to make such choices concerning classroom management. But institutional structure provided benefits as well as constraints. Instructors and students were able to quickly begin the work of the semester without spending valuable course time acclimating to one another. And the students in the course, advanced undergraduates who had successful prior experiences negotiating higher education classes, often found it easier to be successful in the course and manage their time efficiently when the instructor assumed a traditionally directive relationship with them in terms of assignments and course policies.
The relative institutional status of instructors and students was not the only discursive influence on the classes I observed. In technical communication classes—where the students come from advanced study in a range of scientific and technical fields while the instructor has a background in English—beliefs about disciplinary expertise provide a way to complicate instructor-student authority relationships. Both the instructors and the students were able to invoke disciplinary expertise (e.g., “What does your field teach us about this aspect of communication?”) to provide students an opportunity to assert authority that did not necessarily conflict with the instructor’s control over assignments, classroom management, etc. and was, therefore, perceived as less risky to the students’ success in the course. A potential drawback to drawing on disciplinary expertise to assert authority is that not everyone in the class places the same relative value on a particular discipline. Some students in my study had internalized messages from their own disciplinary communities that writing skills were of little (or of great) importance; these beliefs, in turn, affected the choices they made in the course and in their authority relationships with the English instructors.

Other structures shaping instructor-student authority include gender, sexuality, race, etc. Unfortunately, because these structures are so rarely acknowledged in the day-to-day interaction between individuals, their effects are more difficult to isolate than more freely acknowledged structures such as institutional status and disciplinary expertise. For example, the students in my study freely attributed their perceptions of Frida to her control over their grades (institutional status) or her extensive workplace experience (expertise), but they resisted the idea that their perceptions might have been influenced by her gender.

**Student-Student Authority**

Unlike instructor-student relationships, which have received significant attention in composition, education, and other fields, little attention has been paid to student-student academic authority relationships. I believe that one reason for the dearth of research on student-student classroom authority is that higher education holds an implicit view that students should not engage in hierarchical relations with one another and so should not assert authority “over” one another. In fact, practices (and the texts that represent those practices) throughout higher education encourage a non-hierarchical, socially-based form of interaction between students that takes place on-campus and in residential settings but not in the context
of the classroom. Within the classroom, institutional practices reinforce a focus on individual academic success that does not encourage student-student engagement. These institutional practices, however, are at odds with the collaborative work students are increasingly asked to perform in writing classrooms.

Drawing on observations and interviews, I have identified three methods students use for asserting authority in relation to one another, which I have outlined in Figure 7.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Imitate instructor-student relationship</th>
<th>Adapt socially-based peer relationship</th>
<th>Rely on disciplinary expertise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students imitate instructor-student relationship by &quot;teaching&quot; one another</td>
<td>Students maintain strictly non-hierarchical relations by making decisions jointly</td>
<td>Students invoke expertise from major or job experience as basis for authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contingent on students in &quot;pupil&quot; role accepting another's teacher role</td>
<td>Students avoid direct disagreement by circling around arguments until resolved</td>
<td>Contingent on common perceptions about the value of each discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students switch roles to maintain an overall neutral hierarchy among the group</td>
<td>Contingent on participation of all or most in group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantages</td>
<td>Clear leader means students can begin work of project immediately</td>
<td>Students tend to maintain stronger social ties both in and outside of class</td>
<td>One student's authority in a given area does not negate the potential for another student's authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students concerned with academic success can assert control over outcome</td>
<td>Students hold an equal stake in success of group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawbacks</td>
<td>Roles can become solidified over time</td>
<td>Students sacrifice some time efficiency</td>
<td>Students may not value range of disciplines equally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disengaged students can take permanent pupil role, leaving other students more work</td>
<td>Students sacrifice some individual control over outcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modes of Discipline</td>
<td>Permanent pupils reported to instructor or receive little peer social support</td>
<td>Students who don't accept egalitarian approach of group receive little peer support for claims/ideas</td>
<td>Students whose expertise is not valued or who over-assert expertise receive little peer support for claims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Permanent teachers receive little peer social support for and/or project assistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 7.2** - Methods for asserting authority in student-student classroom relationships
First, since students could not draw on existing institutional practices in asserting authority in relation to one another, they often imitated the more clearly defined instructor-student relationship, with one student “teaching” others in a group. A benefit of this approach was that it allowed students to quickly begin work on a project without first negotiating roles or debating ideas, and when this approach was most effective, the members of a group would switch roles to maintain an overall non-hierarchical authority relationship. The success of this approach depended on members of the group actively supporting one another in the teaching role and avoiding the type of role solidification that leads to unequal work loads.

A second method students used for asserting authority in relation to one another was to adapt the socially-based, non-hierarchical student-student relationships supported throughout the campus to the classroom. This approach involved negotiating individual decisions rather than roles of authority, and in order to remain strictly non-hierarchical, students negotiate through circular discussion rather than direct disagreement. As a result, this style of authority negotiation is the most time consuming of the three outlined here. The success of this approach is contingent on the active participation of all group members and individual students’ willingness to give up some control over the project.

A third method that might be used independently or in conjunction with either of the first two involves students invoking professional and academic disciplinary expertise to assert authority in a particular situation. As with the second approach, this type of authority assertion involves individual discussions or decisions rather than sustained roles, and a particular benefit of asserting expertise is that it includes the possibility for fellow students to assert expertise at other moments. Effective use of this approach for asserting authority is contingent on students’ willingness to value one another’s particular forms of expertise.

In my study, each of these methods had particular advantages and disadvantages that affected the students who used them, and students’ decision to use one or another in a given situation often hinged on the underlying structures (individual academic success, the maintenance of social relationships, time efficiency, etc) that student most valued.
IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING CLASSROOM RESEARCH

Designed as an exploratory study, this dissertation makes several contributions to research in the fields of professional communication and composition by raising issues that have until now been addressed inadequately, if at all. A primary contribution is the degree to which the dissertation attempts to identify the features and patterns of classroom relationships that have often been assumed and/or incompletely understood. As a result, this dissertation has two implications for the future of writing classroom research: (1) it introduces a discussion of classroom authority to the field of professional communication where it has not been previously addressed, and (2) it examines closely the nature of student-student academic authority relationships, which have not received study in the field of college writing-related research. Below, I discuss how each of these areas presents possibilities for future research.

Classroom Authority in Professional Communication

Although the field of professional communication has produced a significant body of research on the role that authority relationships play in workplace settings, little mention has been made of the ways authority relationships manifest in classrooms where instructors and students are doing the work of professionalizing students for workplace careers. Because professional communication is a comparatively new field of study, it has often benefited from scholarship in other areas that preceded it. A drawback to such an approach, however, is that the distinctive features of professional communication may necessitate study into the particular manifestations of phenomena in the field. A prime example of this need was highlighted by Mary Lay in 1994 when she published "The Value of Gender Studies to Professional Communication Research." Lay argued that although gender and feminist studies had been engaged extensively in related fields such as composition and education, professional communication needed to engage these same issues within the context of its own classrooms, research, and work. A similar situation exists when we consider the nature of classroom authority. Yes, the field of composition has already considered many of the issues involving instructor-student authority that I am asking professional communication to consider. However, the many similarities composition studies shares with professional communication are offset by key differences affecting authority:
• Composition students are primarily in their first year of college and may be most familiar with the structure of high school classroom authority relationships, while professional communication students are typically juniors and seniors, most of whom have successfully navigated university classrooms for several years.

• Composition students typically have, at most, a basic introduction to their chosen fields of study, while professional communication students are engaged in advanced studies in their fields and often have completed discipline-specific internships as well.

• In both composition and professional communication classes, the instructor typically holds expertise in a branch of English Studies, but professional communication students are more likely than composition students to have internalized discipline-specific messages about the relative value of English Studies as a field.

• The goal of most composition courses is to introduce and acclimate students to academic writing, while professional communication courses focus on professionalizing students to writing beyond academia in their careers.

Due to the differences between the two types of writing classrooms, authority-based research in composition studies cannot simply be assumed to reflect authority in professional communication classes as well. Instead, professional communication needs its own body of research that examines the distinctive nature of classroom authority relationships.

This project begins to answer that need by looking specifically at technical writing classrooms and asking “How do authority relationships manifest in technical communication classrooms when the students come from advanced professional study in science and technical fields while the instructor comes from a background in English Studies?” Rather than simply assuming the nature of authority and then providing advice for how instructors can best affect that authority, I have studied in depth the development, maintenance, and alteration of authority relationships in the context of particular classrooms. And although designed as an exploratory study, the project identifies several patterns that may be important to instructor-student and student-student authority in professional communication.

A primary purpose of ethnographic research is to propose new theories and/or raise topics of study that may be of importance to a particular field (Rentz 45; Reinharz 167). Ultimately, this dissertation proposes a framework for the manifestation of instructor-student and student-student authority in technical communication classrooms, and this proposal
highlights the need for further research in this area that continues and tests these claims on classroom authority relationships. Future research could examine classroom authority in a larger set of classes to determine the pervasiveness of the patterns identified here. This research could be both qualitative (e.g., interviews or focus-groups with larger numbers of instructors and students) and quantitative (large-scale surveys). Ultimately, it will be particularly useful to compare classroom authority relationships in courses taught by several different instructors and across institutions.

**Student-Student Authority in Writing-Based Classes**

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, composition studies provides a large body of research on instructor-student authority that contributes significantly to an understanding of the nature of authority in writing-based courses. However, neither professional communication nor composition considers to any significant degree the ways in which students assert academic authority in relation to one another in the context of the college classroom. This lack of research perhaps reflects the common belief that the classroom is instructor controlled, therefore, placing the instructor at the center of any research related to classroom authority. What research is currently available on students interacting in the classroom looks at the effects structures such as gender (e.g., Gabriel and Smithson) or language (e.g., Braine) have on students' work in small groups. But these articles appear based on ideal normative student relationships in which students assert no (or always equal) authority in relation to one another. Such articles do not consider how students do assert authority in relation to one another in both positive and negative ways in order to accomplish the work of a class. In 1994, Helen Dale published an article that provided a preliminary examination of student engagement among ninth graders in co-writing groups; at that time, she called for further research on the ways students in writing-based courses work together. To date, that call has not been met.

In this dissertation, I meet Dale's call for research that closely examines the ways students do assert classroom-based authority in relation to one another by identifying three approaches (described in Figure 7.2) students use to accomplish collaborative work in the classroom. Identification of these authority approaches opens the door for further research that might consider what causes particular students and groups to choose a particular pattern
of engagement. Further research might also expand on the patterns I have identified here or identify alternative patterns. Finally, based on a clearer understanding of what students are doing when asserting authority in relation to one another, we can then continue the work of researchers like Susan Gabriel/Isaiah Smithson and Braine, by considering the effects gender, language, sexuality, race, etc. might have on student-student authority.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING CLASSROOMS**

In addition to the possibilities this dissertation raises for further research, it also has implications for teaching. Considering the nature of authority may be particularly relevant in fields such as professional communication and composition because rhetoric instructors, many of whom are committed to feminist and/or egalitarian modes of discourse, often express the desire to “give up” some of their authority in the classroom. But the information presented here shows us that authority is not under the direct control of instructors but is shaped by external forces and actively negotiated with students. First, in the area of instructor-student authority, this research highlights the degree to which instructors might simultaneously resist and reinforce a traditional hierarchy in the classroom when making pedagogical decisions. Instructors might want to offer students more control over the direction of an assignment, for example, but institutional structure continues to invest the instructor with control over the primary pedagogical decisions of the class and the final grading. Foucault reminds us that we can never truly escape the structures shaping us (*Archaeology* 46); the goal, therefore, becomes to make decisions concerning the assertion of authority that coherently and realistically take into account the structures and practices influencing the classroom. DW and Frida demonstrated awareness of institutional influences when they discussed the impact their grading role had on other decisions in the class, such as whether to encourage students to refer to them by their first names.

At the same time, instructors should remain aware of the role that students play in determining the instructor-student authority relationships in a class. Student behaviors such as questioning grades, asking for more guidance on assignments, or participating actively in class activities can all be viewed as students’ participation in the construction of authority. Some of these behaviors may be attempts to alter a traditional instructor-student relationship, while others may seek to maintain such a relationship. David Wallace and Helen Ewald have
argued that not all students want to participate in more egalitarian authority relationships with their instructors (21); in my study, this was particularly the case when students believed they could be more successful or have greater time efficiency in the type of hierarchical instructor-student relationship that they were used to. Whether students resist or support a traditional instructor-student authority relationship, considering student behaviors through the lens of authority assertion can help to explain seeming contradictions. In both the classrooms I studied, students’ awareness of their institutional power relative to the instructor led them to sometimes assert authority explicitly, while at other times they might not.

Technical communication instructors in classes such as those described here where students come to the class from advanced study in science and technical majors may find that the structure of disciplinary expertise offers an opportunity to upset the traditional instructor-student hierarchy. In my study, Frida and DW were able to effectively draw on this structure by explicitly asking students to speak as representatives from their disciplines. Invoking disciplinary expertise could be both a way to upset a traditional instructor-student authority and a way for students to assert authority in relation to each other. Instructors, in particular, might find that building in assignments and activities that incorporate material from students’ majors can be a productive method for establishing what Warshauer has called multiple “authorities” of a class (91). In my study, for example, DW gathered sample documents to use in class from all the majors represented; at some point, in the semester, therefore, each student had the opportunity to be the expert to the class. DW also assigned students to define a concept for non-specialist readers; students then had the opportunity to share their definitions with the class as a whole. Frida used similar methods to encourage students to assert expertise, including asking them to generate examples of technical communication concepts from their internship experiences.

Finally, understanding the nature of student-student authority as I have described it here can help instructors who employ collaborative work (co-writing, peer reviewing, small group activities, etc.) in their classrooms. By examining the challenges students face when working together and the patterns they use to meet those challenges, instructors may be better able to design assignments and activities that actively engage students in the process of determining student-student authority relationships. Recognizing the difficulties students had
collaborating effectively, Frida implemented a number of strategies to highlight for students the collaboration process. She assigned students to first work in groups on a "low-stakes" project; following that project, the class discussed difficulties that arose while collaborating and several types of interaction that might derail effective collaboration. The students then divided into groups again, this time by skill set; at several points during the second group project, Frida asked students to discuss their group work process (e.g., did they select a leader? What types of conflicts arose? etc.). Armed with information about the patterns of interaction students use when asserting authority in relation to one another, Frida could refine and expand on her teachings about the collaborative process.

**CONCLUSION**

I began this dissertation by talking about the ways I perceived authority in my own classrooms and how my experiences as an instructor led me to consider the topic of classroom authority relationships in more depth. Ultimately, my research demonstrated that the process of instructor-student and student-student authority is more complex and more active than is typically recognized. Rather than consider authority relationships only in those instances when instructors and students experience a discord in the classroom, this study encourages us to look at the degree to which authority relationships are always in negotiation in ways that are both positive and negative.
Appendix A: Sample Observation Guides

Class 1
Monday, 26 August 2002

Instructor
Authority to assignments/syllabus/text

Authority to self
• Discussion of expertise?
• Teaching experience?
• Presentation of policies
• Clothing

Time to students

Interaction with students

Students
Responses to instructor

Responses to other students

Non-IRE responses
Class 37
Friday, 22 November 2002

**Instructor**
Authority to assignments/syllabus/text.

Authority to self (discussions of teaching experience, writing expertise, dress, etc).

Authority to students.

References to 'real-world'.

Instructional moments (advising students on how to do something in tech comm).

Success in making self ‘invisible’?

Community building/personalizing.

**Students**
Authority (expertise or knowledge) claims.

Signs of underlife.

Gender differences.

**Class**
Class discussion patterns (including interaction with instructor/each other).

Comparisons to Frida/DW.
Appendix B: Sample Student Surveys

Frida’s Class—Student Survey #1

03 September 2002

Pseudonym (you will use the same pseudonym on future surveys) ____________________

What is your major? ____________________

Are you: male female

What do you think an instructor’s role in the classroom should be?

What is the most important skill or concept you hope to learn during this semester?

Indicate the degree to which each of the adjectives given below fits your perception of your technical writing instructor at this time:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>understanding</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>credible</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engaging</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rigorous</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approachable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dependable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenging</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>informed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fair</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledgeable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open-minded</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional Comments about the student-teacher relationship in this classroom:
Frida's Class—Student Survey #2

Pseudonym ____________________

What was the most important concept or skill you learned during the last four weeks?

Indicate the degree to which each of the adjectives given below fits your perception of your technical writing instructor at this time:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open-minded</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional Comments about the student-teacher relationship in this classroom:
Frida’s Class—Student Survey #3

Pseudonym ____________________

What was the most important concept or skill you learned during the last four weeks?

Indicate the degree to which each of the adjectives given below fits your perception of your technical writing instructor at this time:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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Additional Comments about the student-teacher relationship in this classroom:
Frida's Class—Student Survey #4

Pseudonym __________________

What was the most important concept or skill you learned during the last four weeks?

What was the most important concept or skill you learned over the course of the semester?

Indicate the degree to which each of the adjectives given below fits your perception of your technical writing instructor at this time:

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</table>

What was the most significant factor or event in shaping your judgment of the extent to which this teacher is a competent, credible director of the course?
Additional Comments about the student-teacher relationship in this class:

What student or students has the greatest authority in this class? What makes him or her an authority?

What student or students in the class are the most competent and credible? In what areas are they knowledgeable, and how do you know?

Additional comments about the student-student relationship in this class:
DW's Class—Student Survey #1

Pseudonym (you will use the same pseudonym on future surveys) ______________________

What is your major? ______________________

Are you: male female

What do you think an instructor’s role in the classroom should be?

What is the most important skill or concept you hope to learn during this semester?

Indicate the degree to which each of the adjectives given below fits your perception of your technical writing instructor at this time:

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<th>Adjective</th>
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Additional Comments about the student-teacher relationship in this classroom:
DW’s Class—Student Survey #2

Pseudonym __________________________

What was the most important concept or skill you learned during the last four weeks?

Indicate the degree to which each of the adjectives given below fits your perception of your technical writing instructor at this time:

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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional Comments about the student-teacher relationship in this classroom:
Pseudonym ________________

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What was the most important concept or skill you learned over the course of the semester?

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<table>
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<tr>
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<td>fair</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Additional Comments about the student-teacher relationship in this class:

What student or students has the greatest authority in this class? What makes him or her an authority?

What student or students in the class are the most competent and credible? In what areas are they knowledgeable, and how do you know?

Additional comments about the student-student relationship in this class:
# Appendix C: Survey Data

## Demographics

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<td><strong>Gender:</strong></td>
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Average Student Responses to Likert Scale Survey

**Frida:**

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**DW:**

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<td><strong>5.48</strong></td>
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</table>
Average Student Responses in Frida's Class

Survey Date

- Understanding
- Credible
- Engaging
- Rigorous
- Approachable
- Dependable
- Challenging
- Caring
- Informed
- Fair
- Knowledgeable
- Open-Minded
- Combined

Average Rating

09/03/02 10/01/02 11/05/02 12/12/02
Average Student Responses in DW's Class

Survey Date

09/04/02 09/30/02 11/04/02 12/13/02

Average Rating

4.00 4.50 5.00 5.50 6.00

Focused
Credible
Engaging
Unbiased
Approachable
Dependable
Challenging
Fair
Open-Minded
Combined
Student Survey Responses to Question: What do you think an instructor’s role in the classroom should be?

- To present his/her knowledge to the student at his/her best ability and be willing to help student in times of need w/ classroom
- To inform, TEACH, and get the class involved (not stand up and lecture from notes!)
- To expand on ideas, inform students of the material and its importance [answer given 2x]
- Instruct in a respectful manner while encouraging
- To teach in an interesting manner the class’s subject
- Lead students in discussion and facilitate an open classroom of learning from everyone
- Present subject material to students in a way all students comprehend [answer given 4x]
- To present the class material to the students so they are prepared for tests and will retain the information learned for further coursework
- To answer questions and help us better understand class topics and subject matter as well
- To teach the students and solve their problems in the related field
- Teach course content efficiently and evaluate the students’ understanding of the subject matter [answer given 2x]
- Gives examples of what he/she will be grading you on
- Mediator. If class isn’t going anywhere, should get them on a topic they are interested in.
- To give us a better understanding on technical writing. Teach us by answering questions
- The instructor should provide an environment that involves being specific and direct when it comes to what they want the students to obtain in their class
- Keep the attention of students; relay info in an effective manner
- Teach, provide info and to connect with students
- Leader, but open to suggestions. More like a dictator/democracy type environment that allows for the class to give suggestions and the teacher will consider them
- Leading the class and discussion [answer given 7x]
- Guide, showing students the important information to be learned from the class materials, helping students focus on what skills or knowledge should be taken from the class.
- As a delegator [sic] of class discussion and a teacher of helpful skills
- To make sure course objectives are met, to grade fairly, treat students equally and with respect, keep attention of students (don’t be boring)
- Helper, teacher, peer
- Facilitate learning; not lecture
- Give us useful information that can be applied in life
- Superior, clearly helpful, approachable
- Education, facilitation, motivation
- Inform students on the subject and assignments, helpful, and kind!
- Educate, assess student needs and adapt to class environment
- They should be a teacher and help students succeed
- Teach us technical writing skills (answer given 4 times)
- Teach the material in a professional manner
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