An ‘unavoidable’ dynamic? Understanding the ‘traditional’ learner–teacher power relationship within a higher education context

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ABSTRACT

Power relationships between undergraduates and academics are frequently overlooked. This article explores the construction of a ‘traditional’ power relationship between undergraduates and academics, through the theorisation of systemic and constitutive power and considers the prevalence of this dynamic within a higher education (HE) context. I draw from Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis to explore 32 interviews, 12 observations and 12 policy documents gathered from two post-1992 universities in England. Academics and undergraduates in this study perceived the existence of a traditional power relationship, constituted through the behavioural expectations of the established social roles of the traditional learner and teacher, which form the dynamic. I will discuss the behavioural expectations and distributed powers of the traditional learner and teacher roles, before addressing the prevalence of the traditional power relationship within the universities in this study and the barrier this creates for more collaborative dynamics.

Introduction

The undergraduate-academic power relationship is often overlooked or taken as given in the literature; there is, though, a need to understand the construction and perpetuation of what this article terms the ‘traditional’ power relationship within HE. As such, this article details a dialectical theorisation of systemic and constitutive power to explore the way in which structures create subject positions that constrain and enable social agents to act within particular contexts, which then result in specific power dynamics. The theoretical and methodological dimensions of this paper are interwoven; the theoretical framework of a dialectical relation between systemic and constitutive power is allied with critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological and analytical framework.

Having established a solid theoretical and methodological framework for understanding how subjectivities and power relationships are constructed and reproduced, this paper focusses on the construction of the traditional power relationship through detailing the
socially constructed roles of the traditional learner and teacher, which form its dynamic. The literature is lacking an interconnected conceptualisation of these socially structured roles and their associated power dynamic; understanding the construction and reproduction of the traditional power relationship is particularly important for the current university climate, in which there is an emphasis on collaborative pedagogical relationships (Levy, Little, and Whelan 2010; Little 2010). There is acknowledgement in the literature that the image and role of the modern HE student is being reframed (Brooks and O'Shea 2021; Symonds, 2021), but whilst it is recognised that it is ‘difficult for both students and staff to take on new roles and perspectives’ (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017, 2), there is often a lack of exploration regarding why this difficulty exists. This article focusses on the cogency of the traditional power relationship and argues that its prevalence within the universities in this study presents a barrier for the implementation of collaborative pedagogical relationships, in which power is distributed differently.

**Conceptualising power in HE**

Moving away from theorisations of power that are focussed on domination (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Hayward 2000; Lukes 2005), this article presents a theorisation of power that is appropriate for HE; it acknowledges Haugaard’s notion that ‘there can be no single best definition of power’ (2010, 427) and consequently, considers power as a ‘family resemblance concept’ (Haugaard 2010, 427). This consideration draws from a ‘cluster of concepts’; as such, the ‘traditional’ power relationship in this article is considered through the lens of both systemic power and constitutive power. Systemic power can be understood as ‘the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring their possibilities for action’ (Haugaard 2010, 425) and constitutive power details how individuals, their relationships and their social worlds are constituted by power relations (Foucault 2002).

Systemic power stresses the structural limitations on a social agent’s ability to act because ‘when agents act, they act within limits that are set, in part, by the actions of other agents’ (Hayward and Lukes 2008, 14). An individual’s ability to act in a specific context, then, depends upon the rules of that context. Fairclough suggests that this relation of constraint and enablement is shaped by discourse: ‘people are enabled through being constrained: they are able to act on condition that they act within the constraints of types of practice – or of discourse’ (2015, 60). These orders of discourse, which shape the rules of constraint and enablement, are ‘determined by relationships of power in particular social institutions’ (Fairclough 2015, 63). Systemic power establishes the possibility of action for social agents; it ‘constitutes a way of ordering the world, which precludes certain conditions of possibility and facilitates others’ (Haugaard 2015, 151) and these conditions of possibility are determined through the structured subject positions that enable individuals to act in specific contexts.

For Fairclough, ‘social subjects are constrained to operate within the subject positions set up in discourse types’ (2015, 69). These social positions are embedded in the social world as established roles, within which social agents can exercise power and this power is ‘the capacities to act possessed by social agents in virtue of the enduring relations in which they participate’ (Isaac 1987, 22). These ‘enduring relations’ (Isaac 1987, 22) are dynamics that have become naturalised to specific contexts because of their endurance over time and are founded on the intrinsic natures of the social roles that constitute them (Isaac 1987).
The intrinsic natures are ‘not their unique characteristics as individuals, but their social identities as participants in enduring, socially structured relationships’ (Isaac 1987, 21); this participation within predetermined roles and relationships is what Fairclough means when he argues that ‘being constrained is a precondition for being enabled’ (2015, 69). In the construction of these relationship dynamics, social systems ‘confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring their possibilities for action’ (Haugaard 2010, 425); within the traditional power relationship, the learner is awarded very limited dispositional power in comparison to the teacher, who possesses the capacity to exercise power in the form of structuring lessons, distributing grades, disciplining, and so forth (Isaac 1987).

While systemic power structures subject positions and rules for exercising power, constitutive power enables their continuation. Subject positions and power relationships constructed at the systemic level are perpetuated through adherence by individuals at the constitutive level. This adherence is based on the notion of naturalisation: ‘if a discourse type so dominates an institution […] then it will […] come to be seen as natural, and legitimate because it is simply the way of conducting oneself’ (Fairclough 2015, 113). Subject positions and their resulting power relationships, then, are constructed at the systemic level, but continuously reproduced at the constitutive level through the notion of adherence to naturalised roles.

The dialectical relationship between systemic and constitutive power is evident in classrooms: ‘the discourse types of the classroom set up subject positions for teachers and pupils, and it is only by “occupying” these positions that one becomes a teacher or a pupil’ (Fairclough 2015, 68). Setting up subject positions is carried out through systemic power, but reproducing these positions is carried out through constitutive power: ‘in occupying particular subject positions, teachers and pupils reproduce them; it is only through being occupied that these positions continue to be a part of social structure’ (Fairclough 2015, 69). Learner and teacher roles are considered natural positions for a context in which learning takes place; the roles form a powerful and historically enduring relation (Isaac 1987). Within the university context, undergraduates take up the position of the traditional learner during interactions with academics, who perform as teachers; as a result, the traditional power relationship, in which those roles reside, is frequently adhered to.

This can be problematic for the implementation of collaborative or partnership dynamics in HE. Whilst the traditional power relationship is based upon the unequal distribution of power, with authority belonging to the teacher role and deference characterising the learner role, partnership dynamics rely on ‘collaboration and shared power’ (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017, 2). Whilst some critics emphasise the reciprocity of the relationship in partnership models, others focus on the encouragement for undergraduates to take responsibility for the creation of knowledge, in direct contrast to the traditional learner role. Jensen and Bennett argue that ‘partnership goes beyond listening to students and offers them a central role in developing teaching and learning’ (2016, 51) and Levy et al., surmise that the goal of partnership is to ‘share authority in the process of jointly constructing meaning’ (2010, 4). Haugaard argues that ‘actors who threaten systemic stability by new and innovative structuration practices are met by the non-collaboration of others in the reproduction of those new structures’ (Haugaard 2003, 94). The enduring relation of the traditional power relationship represents systemic stability and thus, presents a ‘powerful structural constraint’ (Haugaard 2015, 153) for actors’ willingness to engage in ‘shared responsibility and cooperate or collaborative action’ (Levy, Little, and Whelan 2010, 1).
Methods

This study uses the Faircloughian three-dimensional model of CDA, which is a dialectical method and explores the relationship between structure and agency; it provides an analysis of the relationship between structured roles and dynamics and their reproduction by agents. Fairclough argues that ‘the ideological effect of one’s “subjecthood” being perceived as commonsensically given, rather than socially produced, is an effect that comes about pre-eminently in language and in meaning’ (2015, 122); this article is concerned with understanding the construction of, and adherence to, the traditional learner role and the resulting traditional power relationship.

To understand the dialectical relationship between the systemic construction of a role and relationship and its reproduction at the constitutive level, this article employs CDA as both a methodology for cementing the theorisation of systemic and constitutive power through discourse, and as a method of analysis. As such, all data were analysed as a text (analysis of vocabulary and grammar), a discursive practice (interpretation of situational context and intertextuality) and a social practice (explanation of the social determinants influencing the text) (Fairclough 2015). The three-dimensional model was applied to key parts of the discourses from the datasets. The textual analysis involved pulling out specific textual elements, including vocabulary and grammar; the data was then analysed as a discursive practice, which involved interpreting the ways in which the text had used other discourses and how these had manifested; these stages were then used to explain the text as a social practice, which involved analysing the social determinants influencing the text, from systems of knowledge and belief to social identities and relations.

The data explored in this paper was collected from two universities in England, University A and University B (A or B in the data), both of which have institutional policies for implementing collaborative learning relationships. University A has a specific institutional strategy to configure a collaborative learning process at the structural level and was chosen to explore how this worked in relation to the traditional power relationship. University B was chosen as a comparative model, the intention being to explore the variation in perspectives and practices between a university with an embedded collaborative model and one which frames collaboration as an optional guideline for engaging students. Both universities are post-1992 institutions, which means they were only awarded university status in 1992, before which they offered vocational disciplines. Researching within post-1992 universities has given this study a specific insight into the traditional learner role because ‘the most starkly challenging students go to the post-1992 universities, where most students need lots of pedagogical and pastoral support’ (Taberner 2018, 144). Conducting the study within institutions that attract less confident and autonomous undergraduates gives the research a more pertinent understanding of the reliance on the traditional power relationship.

This project engaged with 32 semi-structured interviews with undergraduates and academics (12 academics and 20 undergraduates) and observations of lectures and seminars (Lec or Sem in the data); the interviews explored the engagement of undergraduates, as well as the relationships between undergraduates and academics. I selected a purposive sample, which included academics of differing ranks and genders and undergraduates of differing genders and in different years of study (Year1, Year2, or Year3 in the data). All participants were from the Humanities department at both universities, were all voluntary...
and have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality. The undergraduates were all full-time students studying English (single and joint honours), under the age of 25 and a UK resident. This research sought to explore the power relationship from the majority undergraduate population, which meant excluding international, part-time or mature students because of the restrictive scope of the study being unable to justify their different experiences during undergraduate study (Morris 2009; Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; Swain and Hammond 2011). The sample was not chosen to reflect generalisability but instead to ‘identify groups, settings, or individuals that best exhibit the characteristics or phenomena of interest’ (Maxwell 2012, 94).

This article, therefore, acknowledges that the participants in this study are not homogenous, but rather individuals with unique perspectives, each with varying social, cultural, and economic backgrounds which undoubtedly influenced their perceptions. The findings of this article are not intended to be generalisable, but instead intended to offer insights into social roles and their behaviours, and the resulting power relationship they encourage; it offers an illumination of exploring the barriers that exist for implementing collaborative partnerships and seeks to provide greater clarity for understanding reasons behind undergraduates and academics’ behaviour within interpersonal relationships. The study was approved by The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

**The traditional learner**

The traditional learner is the term used throughout this paper to consolidate a role that is often described in the literature with differing terminology to define a similar subject position. In Freire’s understanding of the traditional learner role, ‘educators are the possessors of knowledge, whereas learners are “empty vessels” to be filled by the educators’ deposits’ (1985, 100). Behaving as traditional learners entails that undergraduates depend upon the unilateral authority of the teacher, with little need to create knowledge themselves. This characteristic is naturalised so that ‘what has been socially and historically constructed by a specific culture becomes presented to students as undebatable and unchangeable’ (Shor 1996, 10–11). The traditional learner is a socially constructed role, but because of its pervasiveness throughout years of compulsory schooling, it appears natural. Some compulsory institutions encourage different models, and thus, different social roles, but this article refers to the hierarchical model perpetuated in many state schools throughout England, as these represent the educational background of most participants.

MacFarlane argues that ‘there is a wealth of evidence that students prefer to learn in ways that are often labelled negatively as “traditional” or “passive”’ (2015, 342); the adoption of the traditional learner role encourages these passive learning approaches because of the associated behavioural expectations. Traditional learners defer to authoritative knowledge; they are awarded little power and have limited authority within the dynamic. HE sites of learning and teaching are ‘dominated by traditional teaching methods: lectures, seminars and tutorials’ (Morris 2009, 104) which encourages undergraduates to adhere to the behavioural expectations of the traditional learner role and its propensity for passive knowledge consumption and rote learning.

Moreover, the traditional learner role is characterised by the need for affirmation to build confidence and boost self-esteem. Nixon et al., notes that, ‘lecturers have a double
nature to their students; they can provide pleasure and gratification […] and inflict pain and suffering in their role as judge’ (2016, 13–14). This reliance on teachers is a pervasive characteristic of the traditional power relationship and it is apparent within universities; undergraduates rely on an academics’ evaluation of their ability because of the teacher role’s authority of knowledge. Whilst the literature often acknowledges that ‘in any act of learning, evoked prior experiences, perceptions, approaches and outcomes are simultaneously present in a student’s awareness’ (Trigwell and Ashwin 2006, 244), the majority fails to relate these pre-existing notions to the behavioural expectations attached to social roles, and the way in which these expectations shape the power dynamic that follows. Because ‘the socially competent actor becomes constrained internally […] because he or she knows what to expect’ (Haugaard 2012, 39), undergraduates have internalised the behavioural expectations of the traditional learner role as appropriate for educational contexts. Accepting the authority of knowledge possessed by teachers, deferring to that authoritative knowledge, and seeking affirmation in order to boost self-esteem and confidence, all constitute the role of the traditional learner. Subsequently, when individuals behave as traditional learners, they invoke the traditional power relationship between them and teachers, which constitutes severely limited dispositional power for the learner.

It is important to recognise that power often serves the powerful; the traditional power relationship is shaped to serve academics and anything that challenges this distribution can be met with resistance. The implementation of collaborative pedagogical relationships would require academics to surrender the power dynamic that serves them, or at least, appears most natural to them. Fairclough notes that this naturalisation is ‘the most formidable weapon in the armoury of power’ (Fairclough 2015, 124) because it establishes a common-sense way of ordering social relationships and creates a reluctance to change, which is problematic for implementing more collaborative dynamics (Tong, Standen, & Sotiriou, 2018). This pervasive power relationship needs to be understood fully before universities can begin to seek sustainable means of reconstituting the dynamic along more collaborative lines.

Findings

There were several key findings from this study. First, the data highlighted an accepted traditional power relationship between teachers and learners, which was widely considered an appropriate dynamic within universities. Second, this power relationship is constructed through three key characteristics which were commonly referred to by participants, they are: a teacher’s authority of knowledge; a learner’s deference to that authority; and a teacher’s power to affirm and build a learner’s self-esteem. This suggests that the traditional power relationship is not only built upon a socially constructed naturalisation, but also made up of cogent characteristics that are adhered to within educational contexts. And third, the naturalisation of this power relationship presents a significant barrier to the implementation of collaborative dynamics, which have conflicting behavioural expectations and distributed powers.

The ‘unavoidable’ dynamic

The academic participants of this study frequently reflected on the naturalisation of the traditional power relationship: ‘the silos that are naturally in higher education between
students and academics [...] are quite difficult to break down’ (B, Lizzie). One described it as ‘unavoidable’ (B, Michelle) and another argued that ‘there is inevitably going to be a division’ (A, Mary). The employment of the discursive terms ‘naturally’ ‘unavoidable’ and ‘inevitably’ frame the traditional power relationship as ‘undeniable and unchangeable, always there, timeless’ (Shor 1996, 10 and 11). Undergraduates had similar perceptions, with one arguing that ‘you know it’s there [...] it’s drilled in during your secondary education’ (B, Year2, Edith) and another reflecting that ‘there’s obviously a hierarchy’ (B, Year3, Charles). Another said: ‘I think naturally, there probably is’ (B, Year2, Vera); the choice of the words ‘obviously’ and ‘naturally’ suggests that the traditional power relationship is unavoidable. Fairclough notes: ‘there may be practices and discourse types which are universally followed and necessarily accepted [...] which have built into them coordinated knowledge and beliefs, social relationships, and social identities’ (2015, 99), which provides insight as to why the traditional power relationship was perceived by participants as inevitable or unavoidable.

Because it is difficult to ‘go from just one way of doing education’ (A, Bernard) to another, undergraduates behave in a way that they have been socialised into understanding as ‘the common-sense way of doing things’ (Fairclough 2015, 119). As a result, one academic admitted that ‘they see us as teachers sometimes perhaps, slightly more hippy teachers’ (A, Bernard). Most academics avoided using the noun ‘teacher’ because they considered it unsuitable for universities. One academic reflected on the moment when undergraduates realise that academics differ from teachers: ‘you can see the penny really drops, it’s like, “Oh” because they see us, primarily, as teachers, they don’t see us as researchers’ (B, Vicky). As a social practice, undergraduates associate academics with the teacher role because they provide instruction. Thus, when they begin their studies, ‘they think the role of any of their lecturers is to teach them and to prepare them for assignments’ (B, Janice) and despite several academics resisting the behavioural expectations of a teacher, the adherence to the naturalised role was still apparent.

Analysing the interview discourses using CDA elucidates on the social practice that has influenced the participants’ perceptions. The above responses, that perceive of the traditional power relationship as natural, are shaped by the system of knowledge and belief that emphasises the ‘unilateral authority’ (Shor 1996, 11 and 12) of the teacher role; this was noted by one academic participant when they argued that ‘the power’s in the structure, not in the relationship’ (A, Andrew). Because the traditional power relationship is an ‘enduring, socially structured relationship’ (Isaac 1987, 21), it is perceived of as natural, constituted through endurance. Fairclough argues: ‘together with the generation of common-sense discourse practices comes the generation of common-sense rationalizations of such practices, which serve to legitimize them’ (2015, 114); the naturalisation of the power dynamic strengthens its legitimisation and strengthens its existence within HE. The relationship is constituted by behavioural characteristics related to the power granted to learner and teacher roles, to which this paper will now turn.

**Authority of knowledge**

Within the traditional power relationship, the authority of knowledge granted to the teacher affords them power to ‘tell [students] what things mean, what to do’ (Shor 1996, 11–12). There was consistent recognition in the findings of the expectation that academics hold
authoritative knowledge; the internalised passivity of the learner role ‘makes them feel safe because they’re being told what it is they need to know’ (B, Alistair). The findings highlight that undergraduates ‘perceive that [academics] know a lot more about the topic than they do and they want [them] to tell them about it’ (B, Michelle). This characteristic was also highlighted in the observational data; academics consistently positioned themselves at the front of the learning space, with undergraduates positioned further away and facing them (A, Year1, Lec; A, Year2, Sem; B, Year3, Sem; B, Year2, Lec).

As socially competent actors (Haugaard 2012, 39), undergraduates have internalised the behavioural expectations and powers that constitute the traditional power relationship, which dictate that academics are ‘more educated than [undergraduates] are, and they’re there to teach [them]’ (A, Year 2, Ben). Consequently, undergraduates act accordingly and accept that an academic's authority of knowledge emphasises ‘a prowess’ (A, Year2, Susan) over undergraduates. One undergraduate said: ‘because some of them are so intelligent, that I just feel like anything I’m going to say they’re going to be, like, “Really?”’ (A, Year2, Ben) and another noted, ‘you always feel stupid, literally, you could have the best point ever and […] they’ve already thought of it when they’re brushing their teeth’ (A, Year1, Claire). These perceptions imply undergraduates’ acceptance of an academic’s authority of knowledge because of their intelligence. Traditional learners are familiar with abiding by the notion that ‘what the teacher says goes’ (Hargreaves 1972, 139) and this becomes more pertinent in HE because of the increased expertise of academics. As a social practice, the acceptance of the academic’s authority of knowledge is in virtue of their social role and encourages a reliance on academics to provide finite knowledge. One undergraduate admitted: ‘I said before that they don’t spoon-feed us but they, kind of, do in a way. They provide us with everything that we need’ (A, Year2, Daisy); the validation of knowledge stems from academics’ adopting the behavioural expectations associated with a teacher role, which override the expectations associated with an academic role.

The notion of ‘spoon-feeding’ (B, Year3, Bethany; A, Year2, Daisy), which emphasises the authority of teachers, was associated with compulsory schooling and the same participant reflected on its prevalence within universities:

Students don't always take that responsibility, which I think comes from […] being spoon-fed in school. It is difficult to […] get out of that, kind of, mentality of, “You should be providing me everything I need to know, and it should all be in front of me in pretty colours” (A, Year2, Daisy).

Another participant reflected on this continued attitude of wanting to be spoon-fed within universities: ‘they’re just like, “I really can't be asked, I want people to spoon-feed me”’ (B, Year3, Bethany). One academic acknowledged the negative impact of this behaviour on learning in HE:

The worst kind of tutorial are the ones that […] say, “I don't know what question to do and I don't know what novel to do and I don't know what theory to do and what should I do?” because that's not what we do here (A, Louise).

The expectation that undergraduates should be provided with authoritative knowledge from academics belies an undergraduate taking responsibility for their own learning. It prevents the possibility of discovering and creating knowledge, which are critical characteristics of collaborative pedagogical dynamics (Little 2010).
Despite the authority of knowledge being perceived of as both natural and legitimate, some undergraduates felt frustration at the resulting power differential. One said: ‘intellectually we’re not equal because they have PhDs […] in terms of a hierarchy, I’d say there are occasions when tutors would say that their opinion is more valid’ (A, Year2, Ben). This participant acknowledged that academics have greater knowledge, but still felt frustration at their ability to exercise power based on this authority. As a social practice, individuals are socialised into accepting a teacher role’s authority of knowledge throughout compulsory schooling: ‘I absolutely hated being spoon-fed information at school because a lot of the time I didn’t agree with it [laughing] and there was no argument about it’ (A, Year2, Daisy).

The authority of knowledge that constitutes the traditional power relationship, although accepted by undergraduates, was resented by some because it can hinder their willingness to participate in the learning process: ‘it can be really difficult to then want to put anything forward because it’s intimidating, because you’re fully aware that academically, they’re above you’ (A, Year2, Susan).

One undergraduate hinted at the impossibility of creating knowledge themselves because of the cogency of an academic’s authority of knowledge:

Working collaboratively sounds a lot nicer, but then I don’t know how that would work really, because we’re not on the same level […] I would see myself as a student, I wouldn’t see myself as a researcher […] those two things are a world away from each other (A, Year2, Ben).

Haugaard argues: ‘if an actor can be socialized into taking certain structural practices for granted […] any practice that contravenes these structures are perceived as unreasonable, which constitutes a powerful structural constraint’ (2015, 153). The above participant emphasises the struggle of collaboration based on the accepted system of belief that there is a necessary power differential held up by the teacher’s authority of knowledge. Indeed, despite some frustration, the traditional power relationship was perceived to be ‘unavoidable’ (B, Michelle) in relation to the teacher’s authority of knowledge.

**Deference**

Related to the teacher’s authority of knowledge is the learner’s deference to this knowledge. Academics recognised that ‘students are deferent, and they are in different ways’ (B, Alistair) from addressing academics by title to being ‘very polite, very respectful’ (A, Grace). One academic said: ‘for weeks, you’re still Miss, and they’re still putting hands up in seminars’ (A, Louise), which highlights the prevalence of this characteristic within HE. The discourses of the undergraduate interviews also demonstrated this deference; one admitted that ‘it’s very difficult […] feeling like you have the right to go and knock on a lecturer’s door and take up their time’ (A, Year1, Claire). This deference was considered natural and is constituted through the system of belief that posits that ‘the power resides with the authority of the lecturers’ (Allin 2014, 97) because ‘they’re more educated’ (A, Year2, Ben). For some undergraduates, the characteristic of deference emphasised the authority of knowledge that is awarded to teachers: ‘you’re often apprehensive to note down what other students have said in seminars until the lecturer’s gone, “That’s a good idea”’ (B, Year2, Henry). The observations corroborated this adherence to the traditional power relationship, whereby undergraduates waited for the academic to validate their peers’ responses before making notes (A, Year1, Sem; B, Year2, Lec).
Fairclough notes that ‘the socialization of people involves them coming to be placed in a range of subject positions, which they are exposed to partly through learning to operate within various discourse types’ (2015, 122). Individuals entering HE have learned how to operate within the educational space and deferring to the teacher is a part of being a learner. In universities, this deference engenders the notion that academics are ‘powerful’ (A, Year2, Mitchell) and there was a recognition that it emphasises for undergraduates the idea that “They’re right. I’m wrong” (A, Louise). The traditional learner role is constituted through acceptance and recitation of the teacher’s opinion because it represents authority; as one academic noted, individuals learn this behaviour throughout compulsory schooling: ‘there’s a lot more of, kind of, getting essays back and doing them again and again until you get them right, and it’s almost as much the teacher’s responsibility’ (A, Bernard). One academic drew from Rousseau’s (1968) conceptualisation of the education system when he argued that ‘the whole process of education is actually designed to keep people in a position of inequality and the teacher tells the students, “You are never going to be me”’ (A, Andrew). Deference to authoritative knowledge perpetuates the traditional power relationship, whereby learners have little power to express or create knowledge.

This is problematic for implementing collaborative dynamics because, as one undergraduate reflected, ‘it’ll be typically me getting guidance, and obviously the person that can give that, is the person more in power’ (A, Year3, Daniel). Undergraduates defer to academics because they represent authority, and this notion was corroborated by several participants. One academic argued: ‘I am willing to listen, but ultimately, I am the specialist’ (B, Vicky) and another considered collaborative learning to be problematic because undergraduates ‘don’t know what’s best for them’ (A, Bernard). One undergraduate felt that collaborative pedagogical dynamics were non-existent within universities: ‘it’s very much, we are told to do this and we have to do this […] It would be really cool actually to be able to do something as a collaboration’ (B, Year3, Charles). He elaborated by saying: ‘there’s this whole thing about when you come to university, you’re treated as an equal, as the tutors and things like that, but it’s definitely not the case’ (B, Year3, Charles). Collaborative processes contradict the social practice that shapes the power granted to teachers and learners as part of their socially structured subject positions, which can explain the hesitancy to implement collaborative dynamics reflected by participants in this study.

Moreover, deference encourages the fear of being wrong, which engenders a lack of confidence and a reliance on the teacher role to affirm and thus, build a learner’s self-esteem. Although the fear of being wrong may be universally felt among undergraduates, it was particularly cogent in this study; one possible explanation could be the demographic factor, because as Taberner notes, post-1992 universities attract students who require ‘lots of pedagogical and pastoral support’ (2018, 144). One academic said: ‘we find that they just lack confidence and also, that notion of hierarchy and discipline […] I think in compulsory education, that has to take place […] But nothing could be further from the truth, here, at universities’ (A, Louise). The discourses of the undergraduate interviews acknowledged the association between deference and fear: ‘you always think that they’re going to be really scary and not want to help you’ (B, Year2, Vera). The adjective ‘scary’ was utilised by several undergraduates, which emphasises the association between fear and the teacher role: ‘some lecturers are very scary’ (A, Year3, Jane) and ‘if you have a scary tutor, then nobody wants to talk to them in case they’re wrong’ (A, Year3, Jane). This was particularly evident in one observation, where there was repetition of the word ‘sorry’ from undergraduates, even though it was unnecessary (B, Year3, Sem).
Despite the perpetuation of this behaviour, there was acknowledgement amongst participants that deference is altered within universities. One undergraduate reflected that ‘they do make such a point of the fact that they’re here to help you rather than punish you’ (B, Year2, Vera); because of the association between deference and fear, academics actively emphasised that their role is not to punish, but to encourage. One undergraduate said: ‘if I was to talk to my younger self or something, definitely go and speak to your teachers because they’re not there to criticise you’ (B, Year2, Edith). Analysing this as a social practice, the teacher role and its internalised characteristics caused this participant to avoid seeking help because of the fear of being criticised. This fear is exacerbated by learners’ internalised desire to seek affirmation from teachers to build confidence and boost self-esteem. The teacher’s power to build self-esteem is matched by their ability to damage it; the learners’ struggle between seeking praise and fearing criticism was perceived to be a prevalent characteristic of the traditional power relationship.

**Affirmation and self-esteem**

The reliance on academics for affirmation was apparent in the observations of this study, where many undergraduates sought affirmation after providing responses (B, Year3, Lec; B, Year2, Sem; A, Year2, Sem). Several academics conceptualised the traditional power relationship in terms of a ‘safety net’ (A, Mary) where undergraduates actively ‘look for that affirmation’ (A, Mary) to build their confidence and thus, their self-esteem. Solomon argues that ‘self-esteem is often related to acceptance by others’ (2016, 160) and this was a recurrent theme in the discourses of the interviews. There was consistent recognition from academics that undergraduates often seek validation: ‘they’re not stuck at all, they just don’t think they can do it and they just want you to say for 5 minutes, “You can!”’ (A, Louise). Another felt that ‘you need to show belief in students to help them believe in themselves’ (B, Lizzie); Hargreaves posits that ‘the majority of pupils become addicted to the teacher’s approval during the process of formal schooling’ (1972, 200) and as a result, ‘when they learn, it tends to be as a means of obtaining approval rather than as an end in itself’ (Hargreaves 1972, 200). Although this desire for approval is more evident within compulsory schooling, similar expectations are evoked in HE because of the similarity in context:

> Sometimes you do just need a pat on the head [… ] the one thing I do miss about secondary school is having that teacher who does say sometimes, “You’re doing a really good job” (A, Year1, Claire).

The above response demonstrates how readily the expectations of the traditional learner and teacher roles are invoked, despite the different context.

Some academics felt the desire for affirmation hindered learning in universities because ‘that hierarchy engenders certain things: lack of confidence, “They’re right, I’m wrong”’ (A, Louise). The same academic said: ‘we almost say, pretty much the first 18 months […] “Don’t give us what you think that we want, because we are not teachers”’ (A, Louise). The hierarchy that engenders a lack of confidence is prominent within compulsory schooling, where ‘in pleasing the teacher the pupil protects himself [sic] and maintains his self-esteem. He keeps the stream of approval flowing towards him’ (Hargreaves 1972, 186). It becomes difficult, then, for academics to eradicate these expectations that undergraduates have about the traditional power relationship. As noted by Fazey and Fazey, ‘for learners to be
self-determined or autonomous, they must have a sufficiently high self-perception of competence to be prepared to risk short-term failure (2001, 347); the characteristic of seeking validation from teacher roles has the potential to prevent undergraduates from developing as autonomous learners.

One academic felt strongly that the adherence to the traditional power relationship, which encourages an undergraduate’s reliance on academics for validation, was perpetuated through traditional teaching methods: ‘the transmission model of teaching generally […] it’s not a great model for higher education’ (A, Andrew) because it maintains the notion that teacher roles have unilateral authority over knowledge and inhibits undergraduates’ willingness to learn autonomously. The same academic argued: ‘if we change the way in which we think about the situation, then we could think of students as part of the production, not only of research but also of teaching’ (A, Andrew). For this academic, the characteristics associated with the traditional power relationship were propagated by the familiarity of the sites of learning and teaching within universities:

The way in which more would be helped would be at the beginning to really have a process where students are, almost, trained into what the university is doing […] so they’re not just coming into it and not knowing (A, Andrew).

Another academic agreed:

It’s about saying, “Well, this is a seminar and this is a lecture. This is, you know, this is how these things work” […] you have to train the students up to know how to work with you in that situation (B, Lizzie).

Both academics recognised that the familiarity of HE sites of learning and teaching caused undergraduates to assume certain behaviours based on their internalisation of the traditional power relationship. There are, though, different behaviours expected within HE and undergraduates need to understand these: ‘just saying, “Let’s work as a group” or “Let’s do this collaboratively” is, kind of, rigorous. You don’t just know how to do that […] people need roles’ (A, Andrew). The traditional power relationship belies the possibility of collaborative pedagogical dynamics because undergraduates and academics adhere to the social roles of teacher and traditional learner; the behaviours and powers that constitute these subject positions contradict a collaborative relationship.

Concluding thoughts

This study has highlighted that the traditional power relationship is a cogent dynamic constructed through systemic power; its characteristics and behavioural expectations are well established and naturalised for educational contexts. The traditional learner and teacher have different powers based on the definition of them as socially structured roles. These powers are ‘distributed by the various enduring structural relationships in society and exercised by individuals and groups based on their location in a given structure’ (Isaac 1987, 28). Those performing in the role of the traditional learner and teacher carry out ‘routinely performed and purposeful activities’ (Isaac 1987, 22) because of the ‘indirect form of power in which power is mediated by, and instantiated in, structures’ (Hay 1997, 51). When they carry out these routine behaviours at the constitutive level, they reproduce the power relationships that are formed in relation to the power granted to each role.
The traditional power relationship, then, is socially structured and ‘drilled in during […] secondary education’ (B, Year2, Edith), which has established its status as an ‘enduring relation’ (Isaac 1987, 22). Consequently, it is naturalised for educational contexts; the participants in this study felt as though the traditional power relationship was ‘unavoidable’ (B, Michelle) because of their prior experiences in educational contexts. The findings have illuminated the perception of this traditional power relationship as being constituted through a teacher’s authority of knowledge and a learner’s deference to that knowledge, as well as learners’ reliance on teachers for affirmation. As Fairclough argues, ‘social subjects are constrained to operate within the subject positions set up in discourse types’ (2015, 69); the behavioural characteristics of the traditional learner subject position constitute a powerful structural dynamic, which is established and reproduced at the constitutive level through interactions between individuals.

The dynamic presents a power differential between undergraduates and academics, based on the teacher’s ‘prowess’ (A, Year2, Susan) over the learner regarding authoritative knowledge and a learner’s deference to that authority. Academics are perceived of as ‘powerful’ (A, Year2, Mitchell) within the traditional dynamic because of their role as teachers in the ‘historically enduring relation’ (Isaac 1987, 22). The strength of the traditional power relationship encourages its seemingly natural adoption within universities; the familiarity of the institution as an educational context encourages the perception that this dynamic is appropriate for undergraduates and academics, despite recognition that the characteristics are not always appropriate for learning within universities.

Using the Faircloughian three-dimensional model for the analysis of the data in this study highlighted the naturalisation of the traditional learner role and, consequently, the naturalisation of the traditional power relationship; social practices constitute systems of belief that social agents instinctively abide by. Behaving as a traditional learner within educational contexts constitutes a powerful and established social practice, one which is based on ‘universal and commonsensical’ (Fairclough 2015, 64) ideology. The cogency of the traditional learner role as a social practice created a stark challenge for the institutions in this study, in their attempt to encourage alternative social roles for undergraduates. It also presented difficulty in attempts to encourage alternative pedagogical relationships; in the current university climate, in which more collaborative power relationships are being encouraged (Little 2010), the findings of this study suggest that institutions would benefit from acknowledging the ‘powerful structural constraint’ (Haugaard 2015, 153) presented by the naturalisation of, and therefore adherence to, the traditional power relationship before attempting to implement sustainable dynamics based on collaboration and shared authority. If collaborative pedagogical dynamics are to be encouraged, then an understanding of the formation and perpetuation of the traditional power relationship is critical. A power relationship constituted through shared authority, and shared power, is impossible to effectively implement when the traditional power relationship still predominates because the power granted to the roles that form the dynamic are incompatible. Whilst the traditional dynamic is often acknowledged as a barrier to collaboration (Marquis, Black, and Healey 2017; Tong et al. 2018), this article has gone further to provide an integrated framework for detailing how this barrier is formed and maintained, which provides possibility for understanding how it can be disbanded.

The findings of this study came from two post-1992 universities in England and they are unable, therefore, to speak for HEIs more generally. However, the intention of this paper...
is to provide a foundation for understanding the formation, and adherence to social roles, and the impact of these on resulting power dynamics using a theoretical and analytical framework that can be reproduced. There is recognition of the potential variability in the traditional power relationship; the experiences and enactments of distributed power could be different amongst various learner types or institutions. As such, this paper recommends further research into different learner types, such as mature, distance, international, or part-time learners, as well as different types of HEIs, such as Russell Groups, or even international institutions to provide further clarity on power relationships between learners and teachers in HE and the potential barriers they invoke.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, ES, upon reasonable request and subject to ethical limitations.

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