Disciplinary Power in Adult Educator Practice

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Wen spends a full year working on her thesis proposal in adult education. Her advisor is supportive, but does not give her very much feedback. Wen assumes that this means her work is acceptable, and she continues to read, write, and organize her research. Her time in North America is limited for practical and financial reasons. She finally submits the full proposal to her advisor and a few weeks later is told that that it does not constitute doctoral level work. No details are given, but it is suggested she might look for another topic. Wen is devastated. Has she lost one year of work? What shall she do now? Friends encourage her to question the professor or to go to the dean, but Wen is afraid to do so. She wonders if this has happened because she is a Chinese student or if it is because her advisor is right up at the system and he can do what he wants.

Ron is in his mid-fifties, returning to school after being “downsized” out of work. He is uncertain of his ability to take a certificate in adult education, but several people encourage him to do so. The director of the program admits him on probation and tells him that credit for the courses he takes will be transferred to the certificate program once he has shown he can maintain an appropriate grade point average. Ron works steadily, taking two courses per term and driving taxis at night to help pay his tuition. Although Ron has trouble speaking out in class, his teachers are encouraging, and he often receives good comments on his written work. Ron checks once or twice with the director, but assumes he would hear something if there is a problem with his work. Finally, after three semesters, Ron is told that none of his paid-for credits can count toward anything. He wonders if it is because he is a working class person and not as articulate as his peers.

Kevin, a young undergraduate student hoping to become a social studies teacher, is critical of educational and political systems and makes his views known in class. He questions the premises underlying schools as we know them, especially their role as socializing agents in our culture. Kevin advocates “deschooling,” following Ivan Illich’s work, and hopes to become the kind of teacher who can challenge his own students to question the status quo. Kevin receives F’s on many of his essays and eventually is asked to withdraw from the program. He becomes very angry when he realizes he may have to give up his dream—he cannot fight this system from within.

It is our intent in this paper to examine how power relations are manifested in adult education in the higher education context. To explore this issue, we draw on the voices of students through case studies and the voices of educators who are involved in a research project on authentic teaching (Cranton and Carusetta, 2002).

Perspective
Mezirow (2000) argues that it is the responsibility of the adult educator to help individuals become social change agents through a process of empowerment and transformative learning. But how can this work when we seem to be in the grip of a system that supports the misuse of power? This system is the backdrop to the apparent sense of oppression and helplessness in these learners’ stories.

We turn to Foucault’s (1980) concept of disciplinary power as way of understanding what may take place within this complex structure of power issues in adult education practice. Brookfield (2002) suggests Foucault would be amused by adult educators who maintain that we can give up power in order to foster empowerment of our learners. Disciplinary power describes the process by which we discipline ourselves to conform to an imagined ideal. Surveillance is the most powerful component of disciplinary power. We discipline ourselves by watching ourselves and others. In adult education, we have tended to think of power as sovereign, that is, individuals having power over each other. However, Foucault (1980) argues that disciplinary power is much more insidious. It is based on knowing the inside of people’s minds (p. 104) and is constantly exercised. We are always exercising power and it may be an invisible (to us) process. It is ingrained in our way of understanding our roles as adult educators.

**Learners’ Voices: Case Study Interpretation**

Each of the individuals in our sample case studies assumes that sovereign power is at play. That is, they see themselves as being oppressed by a dominant person, group, or institution. But this may not be the most helpful way to understand what is happening. As Brookfield (2000) comments in relation to Foucault’s work, “a top-down analysis is too deterministic and gives far too much weight to a dominant group’s ability to make the world behave as it wishes” (p. 5).

It is difficult to imagine that Wen’s professor deliberately and consciously dismissed Wen’s work because he saw himself as a member of the dominant elite who had the power to take away a year of her work. Similarly, we doubt that Ron’s program director did anything more than to act in what for her was the ordinary following of procedure—Ron’s grades fell below the minimum required for his transfer into the program. And Kevin’s teacher simply saw Kevin as not writing the kinds of paper he was asked to write for his courses. The administrator was following a rule stating that after a student receives a certain number of F grades, he or she is asked to withdraw. It is likely that none of these individuals thought all that much about his or her remarks or decisions and would be shocked to hear how the students perceived their actions. There is an element of arbitrariness in disciplinary power.

The exercise of power creates knowledge, and, in turn, knowledge produces power. The “politics of knowledge [and] relations of power which pass via knowledge” (Foucault, 1980, p. 69) include the devices by which knowledge is controlled. Over time, groups of people create dominant discourses that prescribe how knowledge should be presented and what constitutes valid knowledge. In Wen’s context, there would be a group of academic faculty in her department who are, in turn, part of the larger academic community. Most of us will have no trouble imagining how this works. At the departmental level, knowledge accumulates as to what comprises a good or an acceptable dissertation. There are probably some written and many unwritten notions of what research paradigm is appropriate in the field, how data should be collected, what should be said in each part of a dissertation proposal, and what style of
writing should be used. In the larger academic community, we find some variations from institution to institution, but there is a remarkable consistency in what a dissertation should look like. Doctoral students are often being inducted into the dominant discourse—learning these mechanisms and procedures. Wen saw herself in a vulnerable position because of her race, English language skills, and financial constraints. It also happens to be that Wen is one of many doctoral students in a large program where there is an inadequate number of advisors. Nobody paid much attention to her. She was not deliberately being brought into the fold; she was largely ignored. Everyone was busy. In the ordinary actions of daily academic life, it was assumed that Wen would discipline herself, that she would feel the normalizing gaze and know what to do. Or to use the more familiar language of adult education, it was assumed that Wen would be self-directed and would develop the habits of mind and normative practices of an academic community of practice.

Generally power relations are not designed as such by someone or some group in a position of authority, according to Foucault. There are many minor, seemingly unimportant bits and pieces having a variety of origins that make up what is then accepted as the way things are done. Someone may decide, at some point, a student should go on probation in a program if his formal schooling is more than 10 or 20 years in the past. This could come about simply because that administrator was uncertain about the ability of a particular student. Next time, someone else remembers that event and repeats the ruling with another student about whom, perhaps, there was no doubt. A student may say something that clicks in with a faculty member’s unconscious habit of mind about working class males leading her to give the student a B—rather than a B. Another person, quite separately, could decide that a B isn’t really a B and therefore this grade doesn’t meet the probation criterion. Someone else could feel uncertain about this and decide to “wait and see,” neglecting to inform the student as the phone rang at that moment and he was set off on another activity. We don’t know; this is speculation. But one can see how a set of control devices can develop. Brookfield (2000) describes the rationale underlying this as being a “breaking up of groups and collectives into separate units … subject to individual surveillance” (p. 10). Ron was a separate unit. He was not one of the group of favoured full-time students, nor was he one of the many working professionals completing course work in the evening programs, nor was he a part of the group of college instructors working toward their adult education certificate as a requirement of their work. He did not benefit from participation in a collective. He was not deliberately oppressed, but he just kind of fell through the cracks in an arbitrary way.

In the midst of Kevin’s struggles with his social studies courses and the resulting failing grades, he came to one of Patricia’s adult education courses based on his perception that in this field he would find a learning environment uncontaminated by power. In his other courses, he was being evaluated, sorted, and punished for his views—views very different from the norm of the Faculty of Education. The surveillance that is central to disciplinary power quickly displayed Kevin as unreceptive to the normalizing gaze. One part of Kevin’s point of view related to schooling included the perspective that he (and others) should not need to follow arbitrary rules and procedures, including regular attendance in class, filling out forms required by administrators, and completing “required” assignments by certain dates. He wanted to learn in his own way. He had heard that this was the philosophical stance in adult education, so there he came. The unfolding of Kevin’s experience was painful for all participants, yet intriguing in relation to the concept of disciplinary power. Kevin was outspoken about his views, and initially, people in the group listened, debated, and enjoyed his unusual comments. Soon, it
became evident that “power is there, that one is never ‘outside’ it” (Foucault, 1980, p. 14). The group, the social body within which power exists, exercised their power and ostracized and rejected Kevin. Patricia offered to work with Kevin on an independent study, but when he refused to complete the required forms, the process of rejecting him from the entire program was embarked on with alacrity by the program administrator.

Educators’ Voices: Interview Interpretation

Now, let us turn to educators’ perspectives. In our interviews with faculty who either perceived themselves as authentic teachers or who valued authenticity, we did not ask initially about power relations. We struggled to understand how these teachers saw themselves as teachers and as human beings, what they believed and valued, how they related to their students, and how they brought their sense of self into their work with students. In our first round of interpretation of the transcripts, power appeared to be one of the themes in our conversations. We then began to pay more direct attention to people’s references to and perceptions of power. These teachers, probably without exception, cared deeply about creating a fair and democratic learning environment. They worried about the power they saw themselves as having, and they simultaneously noted that they needed to exercise power in order to be responsible educators. They wanted to “give up” power, which Foucault argues we cannot do; they also wanted to use power in such a way as to benefit their students.

One senior educator is conscious of exercising power and aware of and critical of some of his motives:

*The power lies with the professors, and my classes are often structured so that I don’t lecture or read a paper, but I’m still very conscious that I structure them. …. Sometimes I use that power, I mean, when I get disappointed in myself is when I use that power to carve out my space vis-a-vis other courses … we do a little bit of it each time we give an assignment or give a grade, and that’s an exercise of power. There’s a negotiating about that power, and most people I talk to are frustrated by that negotiation and that relationship. …. And then we, in a sense, become the allies of the students, because we want our students to do well, and they want to do well, so we now are allies against the common enemy rather than us exercising the power.*

Another senior educator works hard to help his students see themselves as agents of power in the classroom, and he relates this to authenticity:

*Everything I’m doing as a teacher is focused on getting people to speak to other people from a position of authority, write to other people from a position of authority, that is, in such a way that the transaction between them is authentic. This is where I think authenticity comes in. That if I have something to say to you, I’m saying it because you don’t know it and want to, not because I’m saying it in order to prove that I can say it. Most commonly, educators indicate concern about power relations. They do not want to exercise power, and yet they may worry about “losing” power. Typical of this response is the following quotation from a conversation with a science professor:*

*You know, we talked about power before, and it’s a serious thing for me, because I hope to goodness it’s not, but I suspect there’s always that there, and I hate the fact that it’s there. When I look at the example of S, I think it’s not power in her case, because the worst I could do is not let her have that desk space, which is pretty minimal, you know. And the other thing is, because on some occasions, I’m asking them directly for*
very specific things, and they’re not doing them, I think, it’s almost like I don’t have any power. We have a meeting and we write down precisely what they’re going to do next, and I need this from them, and it just doesn’t happen… So sometimes, I think really, that I’ve abdicated power, is that the word? But basically lost it. You know?

Other educators simply acknowledge that they have responsibility and authority but do not choose to label this as power:

_I think about it a little bit differently maybe, it’s responsibility. Alright? I have certain responsibilities that I have to exercise, and where the challenge is, is being friendly and interacting with them, but I still have to assess them, I still have to grade them, it’s not a power issue for me. Where I utilize my authority is to try to... if I need things to happen in a certain way, or happen efficiently, I try to give very clear, definitive instructions, and make sure there’s no question whatsoever, with those instructions. It’s a clarity issue with me._

A new faculty member puts it this way:

_I don’t see it in terms of power, I guess, I really don’t. It’s certainly a situation where I don’t think we’re equals, but I’m not convinced that every situation of inequality and difference implies domination and submission. So, I don’t see it as an inequality that requires a power differential._

The system itself assumes faculty make the decisions about teaching. As one of our educators puts it:

_But I do think we pretend sometimes, that we are giving away power, that we are facilitators, guides on the side, not sages on the stage, all of this rhetoric. And it’s possible to have a completely unteacher-centered lesson that is very structured by teacher power. Most of them are. And so, we have to be honest with ourselves. I mean, the university tells us to give a course outline out and tell how we grade people. So, in a sense, the very structure mitigates that we exercise power._

Through ordinary, daily acts, routines, and procedures, we build up a way of perceiving and behaving within a system, including the education system. We are familiar with, for example, the norm of courses within a university program, students being graded for achievements in courses, and procedures for giving feedback to learners and submitting grades to central record-keeping people. We agree that students’ individual work, not collaborative work, should be evaluated, even though we are quite aware that outside of the system, collaboration is not only valued but is a part of everyday life. A collection of such norms creates a “normalizing gaze” which we as educators maintain and which students use to discipline themselves. There is a striking resemblance between the normalizing gaze of disciplinary power and the uncritically absorbed habits of mind that underlie transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000).

**Implications**

Foucault (1980) writes that power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power… individuals are vehicles of power (p. 98). This exploratory paper examines the exercise of power from the learner’s and the educator’s point of view. Learners, especially those who feel they have been mistreated by the “system,” administrators, or teachers, do not see themselves as exercising power; quite the
contrary, they see themselves as victims of those who have control over various important facets of their learning and their life. Although we did not include stories of successful students, or those who learn to work effectively within the system, even here one finds individuals who believe they have learned to play the game, but in fact see themselves as relatively powerless. Educators tend to think and worry about power in quite a different way. They do not want to exercise it inappropriately, and some prefer to believe they can avoid power issues if only they try hard enough. Other educators prefer to name power as authority or responsibility and describe this as a legitimate part of their role. It is the goal of most educators is to have a fair and democratic learning environment.

Naturally enough, things look different from the perspective of the student and the perspective of the educator. What implications does this have for our practice? The adult education literature has long advocated learner empowerment and the “giving up” of educator position power. If we accept Foucault’s arguments, no one can give up power. It is always there. We automatically and naturally influence those people with whom we interact. That we are in a position that is socially constructed to be powerful (at least in the eyes of students), and that we have the responsibility of giving grades, choosing readings, and structuring classes, means that we need to be conscious of how we exercise power in each of our everyday, ordinary movements in the classroom. It is important to challenge our view of power as a negative influence—it is through the productive use of power that many of the good things happen in our teaching. In the words of one of the educators quoted here, “everything I’m doing as a teacher is focused on getting people to speak to other people from a position of authority.” But perhaps one of the most important things we can do is to help learners recognize that they themselves are agents of power with the capacity to subvert dominant power relations (Brookfield, 2000).

References