Chapter 3
Children's Power for Learning in the Age of Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter situates discussions of children's power for learning in the context of new media and technology. We assert that for learning to take place, children must exert their own power and take initiatives in their learning; yet, the current power structure of classrooms inhibits children from exerting their power and motivation for learning. Tracing the seminal works on power, we provide examples of children's power in learning and argue for a power structure transformation necessary in a technology-rich classroom of the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

A class of third and fourth graders engages in a lively discussion on food chains, what eats what, and how decomposers break down dead matter, when the discussion turns to composting plant waste. "Oh yeah, we compost in RuneScape so our veggies will grow better!" Faran chimes in. Several other boys enthusiastically discuss plant matter they have virtually composted as well as other quest related tasks they encounter in this popular online game. The depth of discussion on this ecological process is amazing. There is a hefty amount of text these third and fourth graders willingly read to improve their play of this game. Along the way they are determining their own purpose for reading, encountering content specific vocabulary such as: vegetation, produce, organic, and rotting; academic vocabulary such as: treated,

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yield, increase, and interacting with one another online in a cooperative manner.

What motivates these young children to engage in the traditional literacy demands required by school on their own time? What motivates them to master a video game, engage in online play, or seek information on a topic that sparks their interest or curiosity?

In synthesizing an abundance of research on motivation, Daniel Pink (2009) attributes this kind of motivation as the boys' desire to direct their own life, to improve their skill at the game, and to be a part of a large game playing group. According Pink (2009), motivation comes not from the old behaviorist carrot and stick model of rewards and punishments; instead, motivation comes from three factors: autonomy (the ability to direct our own lives), mastery (the urge to get increasingly better at something that matters), and purpose (the desire for what we do to be in the service of a larger purpose). Clearly, within these descriptors of motivation lies a sense of power. One achieves a sense of power when one is confident and capable of achieving his or her goal autonomously and meaningfully.

Our schools are on the cusp of change. As the Industrial Age gives way to the Digital Age, schools find themselves clinging to an outdated system that no longer reflects the needs of today's citizenship, life-style or work force. The societal landscape of the Industrial Age produced the factory model of schooling. Businesses needed workers, schools provided them. Those who did not go on to college were trained to respond to bells, be on time, and do boring repetitive work. In the factory model of schooling, students are viewed as products; teachers, in turn, take on the role of factory technicians making the additions and adjustments to their products required during their year (Schlechty, 1990). There is little power in being a product - or a factory technician.

The factory jobs of the past have been automated. Even jobs that require a certain knowledge skill set, such as tax preparation, customer service, or information systems support can be outsourced to less expensive labor forces in any place on the globe with Internet access. As we struggle through this transition period of letting go of old models without yet knowing how the new model should look (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009b), educators sense the power structures of old begin to blur and the change as our students have knowledge and skills that many times surpass our own in areas of technology usage. Children remind us how to use our Interactive White boards, how to animate a Power Point, or how to join a social networking group. They are eager to teach us how to navigate digital worlds. They are in a technology world, a context that makes the discussions of the focus of this chapter, children's power for their own learning important, even urgent.

Objectives

After reading this chapter the reader will develop an awareness of how the perception of power structures in early childhood classrooms is shifting due to the influence of technology. The reader will be able to reflect on the instructional environment and interactions in their classrooms as influenced by the power roles of children and teachers. The reader will be able to better understand:

- Context of learning
- Power structures in schools
- Power of technology
- Information power

BACKGROUND: THE IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY BEING THE CONTEXT

The importance of a context has been highlighted in many historical events. History is replete with great ideas that, because of lack of the right technology, could not come to fruition. The thinking was in place long before another, in a different

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