The Essence of Powerful Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Empowering learners and using powerful techniques are prominent elements in the discourse of adult and vocational education. But what constitutes the elements of what might be considered as powerful teaching? This paper begins by examining the way educators talk about power and then proposes four elements that lie at the heart of powerful teaching: understanding how power dynamics intersect with adult educational approaches, supporting empowerment, helping learners understand how power works, and rendering teacher power transparent. The paper uses the work of Baptiste, Marcuse and Hooks to explore some of the problems involved in adult teachers attempting to work in the democratic manner endorsed by the adult education tradition. It concludes by acknowledging the practical and ontological contradictions of teachers trying to balance their prescriptive agendas with a learner-centered approach.

Keywords: Authenticity, Empowerment, Learning, Power, Teaching

If there’s one thing I know about teaching adults it’s that power is always in the room, constantly surfacing in surprising ways. I’ve had over four decades of experience since my first eventful week teaching at Lewisham and Eltham College of Further Education (London) in 1970, but the same questions and dynamics perplex me as much as they did then. How can I ensure that my positional power as the teacher is being exercised responsibly? What do I do when students use the power of silence, negative body language, mockery, verbal hostility or overt non-compliance to sabotage me? How do I deal with power discrepancies amongst students when I suspect some students are speaking more and dominating the class because of the power they exercise in their roles outside the classroom? How can I teach students about the ways that dominant power and ideology constrain their lives, even as they embrace that power enthusiastically?

This article explores these and other related questions about how power, teaching, and adult learning intersect. I assume power is omnipresent in all adult learning situations in which someone is identified as the designated teacher. From adult vocational education to corporate training, religious formation to social movement education, professional development institutes to community college classrooms, power dynamics endure. It doesn’t really matter what the subject content is, teachers and learners constantly exercise power. I would argue that a recreational class on local history is as much informed by power dynamics as a critical theory class studying the concepts of

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hegemony and dominant ideology. You can’t understand adult education or teaching without examining power.

Much of adult education purports to be about empowerment, about teaching for a particular kind of learning that involves adults developing skills, increasing understanding, and acquiring information that enables them to take all kinds of matters into their own hands. This kind of teaching is intended to nurture a sense of agency in people so that they feel confident in their abilities as learners and political actors. Of course empowerment, like power, is not a transparent, monolithic idea. Empowering people to learn the rules of the game so they can succeed in negotiating organizational politics is not the same as empowering people to reject those rules and seek to change the basic way organizations function. The whole notion of empowerment suffers from the confused belief that adult educators can ‘give’ their power to learners. As teachers we can work to remove barriers and to help students develop knowledge, skills and confidence, but only students can empower themselves. Empowerment, after all, can only be claimed, not given.

Anyone interested in empowering learners has to acknowledge that they are acting politically; in other words, to make power work on their behalf. The teaching I explore is meant to prepare people to participate in deciding how they will use the resources available to them and how they will act in the world. Because I work from a critical theory perspective (Brookfield, 2004) I am interested in ways learners challenge dominant ideologies such as capitalism, White supremacy, and patriarchy. From this perspective empowered people work to change the fundamental, structural aspects of their lives and communities. This project is described much more fully in my book with John Holst, Radicalizing Learning (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). In line with this project I was particularly pleased to be contacted by different groups involved in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement who wanted my suggestions on techniques and methods to institute horizontal decision-making in their general assemblies.

I am also interested in helping learners feel powerful enough to change significant elements in their lives without necessarily changing the fundamental structures in which they function. So I hope students I teach will get more satisfying jobs, learn how to advocate for themselves and their families, get involved in local community organizations, and so on. We all have to live in this world while dreaming of another possible world and it does not seem philosophically contradictory to work in the present, with all its constraints and limitations, while simultaneously working for a radically different future. In fact I’d say this is life as a lot of us know it. Of course, putting elements of an imagined future into practice is the difficult bit.

HOW DO ADULT TEACHERS THINK ABOUT POWER?

Not only the reality of power is everywhere, but also its rhetoric. One of the most frequently used words in the discourse of adult learning, power has three chief connotations. First, and most frequently, a powerful teacher or leader is often characterized as a person with charisma, wisdom and presence; someone who can hold an auditorium in the palm of their hands or whose personality can fire people with enthusiasm for learning. These are the individuals who win ‘Teacher of the Year’ awards and who feature in media portrayals of teachers. The power thought to be exercised here is usually the power to inspire. Quiet power, power behind the scenes, the power of grass roots organization can get lost in this emphasis on charisma.

In this discourse power flows overwhelmingly in one direction, from teacher to taught. The teacher motivates and inspires others by her presence. A powerful technique is understood in a similar way as a task, exercise or activity that is so skillfully energizing that it cannot fail to activate students’ enthusiasm, dispelling any resistance to learning they feel. Such a technique is imagined as a kind of elixir that, once drunk, turns apathy into engagement, hostility into eagerness. In Learning as a Way of Leading (2008) Stephen Preskill and I argued that
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