

Chapter 2

Distributing Power through Curriculum Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how power can be distributed in the process of curriculum and program development in adult and higher education. As a theoretical framework, the author relies on Brookfield's writings on power and, in turn, Foucault's writing on power, which has had a strong influence on the thinking of adult education scholars. From there, she turns to practical strategies for distributing power through curriculum development. These include: learners' selection of topics, learners' setting of objectives, learners' selecting methods and materials, learner self-evaluation, equitable discussions, questioning styles, and structural issues. Finally, the author explores future directions for research.

INTRODUCTION

How can we ensure that power is exercised responsibly and distributed among the participants and educators through curriculum development? Although decades of theorizing, writing, and research has advocated the distribution of power among learners through self-directed learning, experiential learning, and learner-centered teaching, much of the curriculum and program development in adult and higher education follows a traditional format in which curriculum developers make the major decisions about the nature and structure of the learning experience. In the first book written on adult education, Lindemann (1926) emphasized that the democratic process

in adult education—critical analysis, concern for others, the acceptance of opposing perspectives, and a willingness to live with potentially uncomfortable majority positions. Writing at about the same time, Dewey (1916, 1938), who did not deal exclusively with teaching adults, proposed that educators encourage learning by experience, through problem-solving, and through reflection. He suggested that educators select experiences with the learners, and that students participate in cooperative and mutual learning experiences with the teacher.

Freire (1973) is well-known for his suggestion that the “banking model” of teaching (educators depositing knowledge in a student's empty mind) reinforces the notion that the teacher has the power

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and the knowledge. He advocated that educators become co-learners—participating actively in the learning process and being mutually responsible, with the learners, for the learning process. At about the same time, Malcolm Knowles (1975, 1978) emerged on the adult education scene and quickly became a leader in the field as he proposed and elaborated on his model of self-directed learning. Knowles had a vision that stayed with him throughout his prolific career and informed the development of courses and programs across North America. He encouraged educators to help students work with their own learning goals rather than to tell them what to learn and how to learn it. His thinking rested on four main assumptions: that people move from dependency toward self-directedness as they mature; that people accumulate a reservoir of experience that becomes a resource for learning; that people are ready to learn something when they experience a need to learn it; and that learners see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life.

Mezirow (1977, 1981) also first introduced transformative learning during the same time-frame, though, oddly, neither Mezirow nor Knowles acknowledged each other's writing in spite of the clear overlap between the scholars' thinking. Mezirow described a process by which learners experience a dilemma during which they become receptive to learning. He originally proposed a ten-step learning cycle: a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, critical assessment, exploring options, building confidence, planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge to implement plans, experimenting with new roles, and reintegration. Mezirow (1991) expanded his original work to create a comprehensive theory of adult learning, and since that time, many scholars have critiqued and elaborated on Mezirow's work (for example, see Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

The themes of power, the distribution of power, and empowerment run through the history of the adult education literature and remain central today.

In this chapter, I explore how power can be distributed in the process of curriculum and program development in adult and higher education. As a theoretical framework, I rely on Brookfield's writings on power and, in turn, Foucault's writing on power, which has had a strong influence on the thinking of adult education scholars. From there, I describe practical strategies for distributing power through curriculum development, and, finally, I turn to future directions for research and theorizing.

Theoretical Framework: Power

As outlined in the introduction, the theme of power and power relations has a solid history in adult education, though less so in higher education. To introduce the theme of power, I provide three Canadian examples. MacKeracher (2009) traces the historical perspectives on social change in adult education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Canada. In the nineteenth century, social movements in Canada were modeled on those from Great Britain and the United States—the Mechanics Institutes, YMCA and YWCA, agricultural extension, and labor movements (MacKeracher, 2009). In Canada, for example, Frontier College began as a reading room in a lumber camp in order to empower manual laborers through the development of literacy skills. The founder of this movement, Alfred Fitzpatrick, argued that continuing extension education for laborers needed to be offered through universities. When this failed, he established Frontier College as an alternative. Also in the late nineteenth century Farmer's Institutes were established to help farmers learn about more effective farming practices (MacKeracher, 2009). This led to the notion that the wives of farmers needed to have their own organization and educational programs, and by 1913, most provinces had parallel Women's Institutes. The now well-known Antigonish movement was founded by a Catholic priest, Father Tompkins, to help farming, mining, and fishing communities in Nova Scotia address

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