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Depowering Education

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Introduction

The notion of 'empowering' people has become popular and ubiquitous, typically focusing on 'emancipating' oppressed, marginalised or minority groups such as women, people of colour (POC), ethnic minorities, or the 'poor' (socially and economically disadvantaged). The concept, however, is applicable to any context where 'power' operates. Hence, we talk about 'empowering' students within higher education institutes that have traditionally been (and often still are) accessible only by 'elites' with a 'right' to be there (identified by some measure – financial, informational, learned capacity, inherent talent, or acceptable social standing).

A quick dictionary search reveals the 'blind spot' of empowerment. It means to "give (someone) the authority or power to do something" and/or "make (someone) stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their life and claiming their rights" (Oxford online, 2024). So 'who' is it that does the giving and the making? How did they get there? And, why would people need to 'take control' of their lives in the first place? That is, when and how did they lose control? Further, if empowerment involves the 'claiming' of rights – which admittedly centres the action on the subject *claiming* power (rather than the one 'giving' it), who or what is adjudicating the 'claim'?

I argue that 'empowerment', despite its discursive popularity and radical connotations, both invokes and accepts 'power' structures, leaving them unquestioned and untouched. Furthermore, 'empowerment' has been part of how some institutions work. Universities 'empower' their graduates

by giving them opportunities, capacities, and qualifications (formal recognition) which are *not* 'open' to others. Mid-20th century struggles onwards have focused on inequality and inequities regarding 'who' gets access to mechanisms 'empowerment'. Graduates, of course, might scream that we are deservedly where we are due to our work ethic and meritocracy. Statistics (and Nobel prize economist Joseph Stiglitz) tell us otherwise – poor women in Africa work the hardest. All graduates are privileged and, literally, entitled, having been 'empowered'.

In place of 'empowerment', I offer *depowering* as an alternate conceptual means of verbalising, discussing, and practically reflecting upon the purpose of education and our practice as 'critically conscious' educators for the practice of freedom (Freire, 1974) within "dominator culture" (hooks, 2003). I see depowering as sitting alongside other contemporary Ds (decolonising; degrowth). Now having burned 400 words on the introduction, my goal is limited to taking a small text-chisel and making a tiny initial crack in a large edifice. Put another way, can we have a rethink?

Beyond Power

In his 1993 book *Buildings & Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types,* Tom Markus studied the architectural evolution of institutional buildings, including schools and colleges, across the Enlightenment (1750-1850). Buildings are an "interface" (p.13) – spaces which bring people of different kinds (classes / labour divisions) into *contact* for specific purposes. The classroom (including the virtual version) is one such 'space'. But conventional interfaces consist of inhabitants and visitors, where the inhabitants have control. Interestingly, in prisons, hospitals, boarding schools, and universities 'visitors' occupy the space more consistently than 'inhabitants' (who go 'home' between shifts). Students may reside on campus but regarding control they are 'visitors'.

From his historical analyses of evolving *spatial syntax* (Hillier & Hanson, 1989), Markus highlighted a tendency for buildings to become more 'open' in their layout as modernity progressed. That is, the addition of corridors and removal of doors between small interconnecting rooms produced more free-flowing interactions. Contradictorily, capital accumulation requires freer circulation, to aid higher efficiency and greater expediency, leading to barrier removal even though the 'accumulator' (capitalist) is aiming for *more* control, not less!

Defining power as 'control of one person by another', later buildings involved fewer 'controls' and, thus, less power. As Tom said to me, "what we really appear to be producing are relationships which are powerless, as in becoming power-*less*". Perhaps we will never escape all mechanisms or relationships of power (i.e., the *necessity* for them – young children need 'control' for their safety), but just as Adam Smith's world of rising opulence reduces the time it takes to produce our daily bread (a necessity), thereby reducing the *realm of necessity* in favour of more free time (a *realm of freedom* – from necessity), relationships of (and 'in') power can and should be marginalised – pushed out and replaced by de-powered ones (freed from power).

A classic sign of power and empowerment is the way in which fellow adult citizens are treated as children (e.g., the infantilisation of women). The enabling or encouragement of some of these 'children' to rise (through empowerment) and move on – confidently – to treat others as 'children' does not change the nature of power. As an aside regarding adult education, why do we still use the term pedagogy (which references childhood learning) when we should be using *anthrogogy*? In summary, we need to go beyond power, not replicate its follies nor its language (discourse).

There's Nothing New Here

Why do the powerful need to empower 'others'? In Victorian schools, the only way a single schoolmaster or mistress could teach several classes (age groups) at once was to delegate responsibilities to 'monitors' – more senior, unpaid pupils. A cheap and cheerful solution. The downside of such 'student/worker' engagement is the slipping away of 'power' (control) as it becomes shared. The *distribution* of 'empowerment' is pregnant with its own dissolving. Wherever power meets resistance, those 'in' power may think of further empowerment as means of conservation.

Yet, the process highlights the extent to which 'the silent' influence change in relationships (pushing towards *depowerment*). As Michel Foucault (1979) noted, thought of as 'docile bodies' the unrepresented do not feature in *recorded discourse* (they are 'mute'). But these subjects make themselves *felt* through their silent resistance, such as tool sabotage, shying away, or defiant *refusal* to 'engage'. As such, they are agents (actors) not patients, and it's not always about 'vocal' claimants to power.

In the contemporary classroom, *depowerment* has been taking place – it has a *presence* which is not always acknowledged. The following diagram (Figure 1) presents 4 recognisable spatial forms found in higher education: (a) theatre; (b) islands; (c) horseshoe or boardroom; and (d) circle.

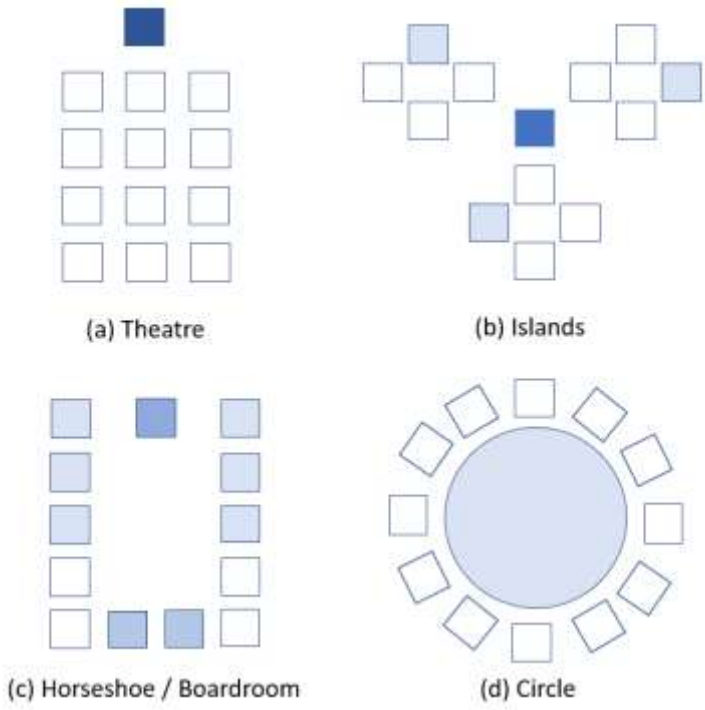


Figure 1: Spatial Forms of Power in the Classroom

How do we now understand the effectiveness of the first (theatre) in learning terms? What does its concentration of power (focus on 'teacher') do regarding learning? Does it do anything? Or are our 'actions' (e.g., lecture capture), surrounding its dying efficacy and value, really about the snorers, the distracted (by devices or doodling), and zone-outers whom teachers *encounter* and *struggle* with?

By contrast, the fourth (circle) might be described by bell hooks (2003) as 'love'. Some may find the term de-ranged in this context. What she means is 'mutuality' where the teacher (aiming to *transgress* power) no longer relies on nor requires formal authority to be listened to. Teaching does not take the form of 'content' *delivery* but teacher *learning*, namely, about the experiences and *struggles* fellow learners (students) have when encountering subject matter.

But Power Refuses to Go …

A question I often ask myself (like bell hooks, 1994) is 'Why do students resist more open, conversationalist forms of learning?' Shouldn't they be eager to get away from the shear quantification (and reduction) of their learning experiences to 'grades'? And why do anxiety-inducing assessments become the focus of learning (as a 'rite of passage'?), only to be done, dusted, and left behind ('passed' as past)? This is a process which often leads to instant loss of (educational) meaning as well as memory ('knowledge').

From my (32 year) experience of teaching adult returners and foundation learners, many struggle with open-ended assignments where there are no 'black and white' answers. Students find these *more* difficult because no definitive instrumentally-oriented product is to be uncovered. And as we are encouraging learners to draw 'their answer' from their prior lived experience (as part of critical thinking, reflective practice and problem solving) a typical cry is how can the answer be possessed if we, teachers, don't already have it? Isn't education about distributing and accumulating facts to ensure qualification?

Clearly, the 'outside' world of power seeps 'in' and shapes our educator's practice, especially through the power-oriented societal conditioning of students and teachers (e.g., the power-filled instrumentality of 'employability'). Nonetheless, contemporary education remains a site of constant struggle between the retention of power (the world as it is) and the creation of relationships (lifetime bonds) which move beyond 'power'.

What might be done?

Should students be able to decide when, where, how and why they are assessed? Recently a positive response has been given to this question within HE. However, it is presented as 'empowering' students and getting them to 'engage' with power mechanisms!

An alternative understanding involves recognising students' lack of engagement as part and parcel of educator's power – students 'fail to engage' not because **they** *lack* 'empowerment' but because someone else *claims* the right (the power) to decide ("You will engage – it's policy"). In order to have true 'engagement' there needs to be parity and openness, and this entails the *giving up* of power on behalf of the educator. The key issue is what the parties are engaging *in* – a free association or a power structure? This means, at the same time, that students can't simply demand the educator 'serves' *their* 'outside' world of instrumental requirements, despite the 'debt' the latter imposes. Power corrupts the educational relationship in either direction.

With this in view, what we can do is encourage practical reflection on the educational *process* – why is the learner 'here'? And why is the teacher? What are both trying to achieve? As a consequence, all teaching and learning requires criticism of the process taking place (and the relationships this process entails). One thing I try more often is to ask students to read a blog like this (on teaching and

learning) so they comprehend where many of the problems they *face* lie: who is it that gets to decide and why? And how did they get into such a position of power within this particular 'interface'?

Conclusion

There have been clear shifts in educational practice in recent times, with greater focus on the student as learner 'agent'. But perhaps we need to 'flip' our understanding of 'power' and the nature of the process of change taking place – have we (collectively, teachers and students) been *depowering* education? Shouldn't we go further?

[1,719]

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