

**Some certainties in the uncertain world of classroom practice:  
An outline of a theory of power relations in pedagogy**

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Drawing upon a Foucauldian analysis of power, past empirical studies of pedagogy, and a recent study of power and pedagogy conducted in four different settings, this paper outlines five theoretical propositions for the functioning of power in pedagogy. These propositions are that: pedagogy is the enactment of power relations; pedagogy proceeds via a limited set of specific techniques of power; bodies are the object/instrument of pedagogical power relations; the kind of knowledge produced in pedagogy interacts with the location of the site and the techniques of power employed there; in pedagogy, different differences matter. Each of these propositions is elaborated and implications are considered.

Educational practice has long been characterised by complexity, unpredictability, and uncertainty while educational research has sought to simplify, to predict, and to increase certainty. In this paper, I address what I consider to be some small yet significant 'certainties' in the uncertain world of classroom practice.

Despite ongoing educational reform of curriculum, of institutional structures, and of pedagogical processes, there seems to be a remarkable continuity in teaching, evident both across various contexts and over time (See Southgate, in press). In my view, an explanation for this continuity in pedagogy lies in the fact that the power relations that characterise pedagogy have altered little (Gore, 1995).

### **Toward a theory of power relations in pedagogy**

My main aim in this paper is to outline some preliminary ideas towards a theory of power relations in pedagogy. My attempt to build a theory of power relations in pedagogy emerges out of a long-standing interest in pedagogy and alternative approaches to pedagogy (e.g., Gore, 1993). Disappointed in some of the limitations of so-called radical pedagogy (critical and feminist pedagogy), I have attempted to go beyond the theoretical speculation that accompanies so much of that literature to a research agenda grounded in observations of a range of pedagogical settings (Gore, 1997). Whether differentiating themselves in relation to the mainstream or each other, radical pedagogy discourses frequently appeal to different conceptions and purposes of education, based on different critiques and visions of society. For instance, feminist pedagogues have been critical of patriarchal society and phallogocentric knowledge, while critical pedagogues have located their origins in analyses of class-based society. Both discourses posit schools as problematic but also as potentially transformative. In general, these critiques and their related alternative visions of better societies, and of schools' role in such transformation, have been prolific and persuasive (at least for those who share related socio-political concerns).

As self-proclaimed *pedagogical* discourses, however, there seems to be an (often unspoken/unacknowledged) imperative to address strategic classroom alternatives as well. This imperative arises from the fact that pedagogy is, at some level, fundamentally about action. As I have argued previously, social vision and instructional practice are joint analytical components of pedagogy (Gore, 1993). While radical pedagogy discourses have been strong on social vision, in my view, they have been weak in terms of classroom or instructional practices. This weakness arises, in part, from a lack of grounding in classroom observation. That is, there has been little systematic or large scale empirical research associated with these discourses.

My goal has been to develop a descriptive theory of the way pedagogy functions in classrooms. Such a theory should provide a stronger basis of understanding from which to develop new approaches, policies, and practices. However, I emphasise that, in the first instance, no particular normative position emerges.

There are three main sources for this theory of power relations in pedagogy: Foucault's analysis of power, existing studies of pedagogy, and my own empirical study. Each of these is elaborated briefly below.

### *Foucault and power*

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power explicitly shifts analyses of power from the "macro" realm of structures and ideologies to the "micro" level of bodies. He argued that unlike the sovereign power of earlier periods, disciplinary power functions at the level of the body:

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point *where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.* (Foucault, 1980, p.39) (emphasis added)

Foucault (1980) elaborates the invisibility and pervasiveness of power in modern society: "The eighteenth century invented, so to speak, a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise *within* the social body rather than *from above* it" (p.39). Using the exemplar of the Panopticon, with its normalising surveillance, Foucault described disciplinary power as circulating rather than being possessed, productive and not necessarily repressive, existing in action, functioning at the level of the body, often operating through "technologies of self."

### *Studies of pedagogy*

In terms of existing empirical studies of pedagogy, while there is a vast body of literature on pedagogy, there is little empirical work that attends both to issues of pedagogy and to issues of power. Bourdieu (in his work with Passeron and others) and Bernstein provide the most sophisticated and detailed analyses of power and pedagogy, but even their work on this topic lacks a substantial systematic empirical base. Bernstein's (1990) theory of power (related to Marx) is derived from mapping societal power relations and showing that pedagogy is implicated in the production of those relations through its rules (regulative, distributive, contextualising, etc.).

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) view of pedagogy as symbolic violence is based on Weberian notions of authority and the legitimate(d) violence of the State. In his focus on the *imposition* of a "cultural arbitrary" (see *Practical Reason*, 1998 and *Nobles of the State*, 1996), Bourdieu's emphasis is on how large discourses are imposed on, and taken up by, the body.

My own view, derived from Foucault, goes beyond Bernstein's (1990) declaration that pedagogy is more than a relay for power relations external to itself to *demonstrate* how the power relations inherent to pedagogy govern and regulate bodies and knowledge and to show that discourses are constructed out of pedagogy itself. From this perspective, power is not simply the imposition of one will on another. Its subtleties and nuances are taken into account in a way that acknowledges the complexity of classrooms in which there is much more going on than the imposition or reproduction of broader societal power relations.

### *An outline of my study*

My own study of power relations in pedagogy was conducted in four different sites-high school classrooms (PE), a university-based teacher education program (TE), a feminist reading group (FEM), and a women's group which engaged in community education courses (WG). The four sites studied were selected for particular theoretical purposes. First, whether

or not they were clearly located within the institution of education was of interest given the possibility that the institution itself is responsible for the nature of the practices therein. Second, the extent to which the explicit approach taken could be seen as "radical" or "mainstream" was of interest given my thesis that radical pedagogy discourses have done little to alter traditional classroom practices. These dimensions were identified as a result of earlier theoretical work I had done on radical pedagogy (Gore, 1993). The following table summarises the analytical location of each site.

	Mainstream	Radical
Institutionalised	PE	TE
Non-institutionalised	WG	FEM

*Figure 1. Research sites*

Approximately six months were spent in each site collecting detailed observational data and conducting some interviews. A vast number of analyses of the data have been conducted. The primary one I address in this paper involved categorising the data with a set of codes, derived from Foucault, designed to identify the micro-level techniques of power enacted in these sites. The coding categories were as follows:

Surveillance: Supervising, closely observing, watching, threatening to watch, avoiding being watched

Normalisation: Invoking, requiring, setting or conforming to a standard, defining the normal

Exclusion: Tracing the limits that will define difference, boundary, zone, defining the pathological

Distribution: Dividing into parts, arranging, ranking bodies in space

Classification: Differentiating individuals and/or groups from one another

Individualisation: Giving individual character to, specifying an individual

Totalisation: Giving collective character to, specifying a collectivity/total, will to conform

Regulation: Controlling by rule, subject to restrictions; adapt to requirements; act of invoking a rule, including sanction, reward, punishment

*Figure 2. Coding categories for techniques of power*

Having provided a brief theoretical and methodological background to the study, the remainder of the paper provides an outline of five theoretical propositions which I have developed thus far out of the three sources identified above. They are deliberately presented as propositions which will need to be tested and validated by others. Nonetheless, I believe they will hold up to rigorous scrutiny. Moreover, I believe they resonate with the personal experiences of pedagogy that most of us have had, whether as teachers or students, in schools, universities or community education.

### **Key theoretical propositions**

Underpinning the following propositions is a recognition that the power relations enacted in pedagogy have three effects:

- 1 they construct relations between participants (*relations*), that is, between and among teachers and students and other stakeholders in education such as school and system administrators and parents;
- 2 they construct self (*habitus* or *subjectivity*), that is, students and teachers are shaped by their engagement in pedagogy; and
- 3 they construct knowledge (*discourse*), that is, what students and teachers come to "know" either through the formal or informal curriculum constitutes and is constituted by power relations.

Hence, relations, habitus and discourse are constituent elements of pedagogy.

*Proposition 1: Pedagogy is the enactment of power relations*

- power is inescapable, not to be shunned but embraced
- the power relations of pedagogy are normalising, etc., hence there are limits to radical pedagogy

From the theoretical perspectives brought to the study, power is not an evil in the classroom, something to be shunned or overthrown. As Foucault argues, power is ever present. Teachers, then, need not be afraid to use their authority, to exercise power. Instead, they can embrace power and use it knowingly.

In all of the sites I studied, each of the techniques of power presented above was present. Whether in the construction of relations among participants, in the construction of self, or in the construction of knowledge, pedagogy proceeded via the enactment of normalisation, surveillance and so on. If such techniques are inherent to pedagogy, and inescapable, then there are clear limits to radical pedagogy's goals to produce classrooms free of the oppressive effects of power (see Gore, 1998).

Foucault emphasises that power is both repressive and productive and there were many instances when the pedagogy could be seen to have productive effects or purposes in the data collected. But these data imply that such moments will not be accomplished by simply "giving" students more power (as if that can be done anyway) and the productive moments themselves are not simple to identify given the complexity of questions such as "productive for whom?" or "productive for what purpose?".

*Proposition 2: Pedagogy proceeds via a limited set of specific techniques of power*

- overcoming the repressive power relations of pedagogical interaction will not be solved by the simple adoption of different classroom practices
- the issue is not whether or not certain techniques are used but, rather, how the techniques are used and with what effects

In each of the sites studied, each of the techniques of power was present. If this set of techniques is characteristic of pedagogy, then the repressive experience of pedagogy will not be overcome by the use of collaborative learning approaches, journals and portfolios, role playing and other pedagogical strategies (especially if they are conceived of as "techniques". After all, there is a limited set of techniques through which pedagogy can occur). Instead, educators might concentrate on what kinds of normalisation they are enacting or permitting in their classrooms, what forms of surveillance are adopted and for what ends, what kinds of classification are made, and so on. Putting students in circles, imploring all students to have a voice, etc., may be no less repressive than traditional forms of pedagogy. If surveillance (like each of the other techniques) is necessary, inherent, and inescapable in pedagogy then the issue is how surveillance is used, not whether it is used.

*Proposition 3: Bodies are the object/instrument of pedagogical power relations*

- power relations in pedagogy are observable which means that empirical work should play a crucial role alongside speculative work in the development of educational theory
- the operation of power upon bodies has direct implications for the construction of teacher and student subjectivities
- the institutional sanctioning of exercises of power gives a particularly corporeal character to the exercise of power in formal educational institutions

Foucault argues that power operates through bodies, power takes the form of actions upon actions. Hence, the micro-level enactment of power relations is visible, observable. This means that educational theorists can go beyond assertion and speculation to document what happens in pedagogy, cognisant, of course, of the limitations of empiricism.

Philip Corrigan (1991) writes about the "tightening of bodies" that accompanies schooling. Foucault (1977) speaks of "docile bodies". Others write about the de-sexualisation of teacher and student bodies in schools (e.g, Epstein and Johnson, 1998), and so on. All of these arguments are indicators of power's effects on the body. Student and teacher subjectivities are clearly implicated in the enactment of power on bodies. They are shaped and marked by the effects of power on their bodies.

My data also show that the institutional sites I studied (the school and university sites) were more strongly characterised by techniques of power that had a more directly corporeal effect. That is, distribution, surveillance, and regulation played a significant role in these settings, but a relatively insignificant role in the non-institutional sites. With this finding, my arguments about the inescapability of power relations and about the limited set of techniques employed in pedagogy become all the more persuasive. Surveillance, regulation, and distribution in fact may be defining features of institutional pedagogy. If so, we have some explanation for why attempts to enact radical pedagogy within institutions are often frustrated (e.g., When one of my students years ago wrote in his journal "I'm not into this regimented reflective stuff", he was reacting to a compulsion that characterises institutionalised pedagogy and assessment and possibly undermines goals of radical pedagogy). That is, radical goals and content may well be at odds with the monitoring, regulating and controlling of students that is always-already part of institutional pedagogy (e.g., Canaan, 1997). Ellsworth's (1989) oft-cited statement that attempts at radical pedagogy were "not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against" (p.91) may be related to these corporeal techniques of power.

*Proposition 4: The kind of knowledge produced in pedagogy interacts with the location of the site and the techniques of power employed there*

- within educational institutions, a substantial proportion of knowledge generated will pertain directly to specific institutional norms and practices
- where there is great emphasis on the formation of radical understandings, normalisation will be a dominant technique and there is likely to be some resistance by students

While the institutional sites were characterised by what I have called a more corporeal configuration of techniques (and hence implicated in the construction of relations among participants and in the construction of the self), the non-institutional sites were characterised by techniques more clearly implicated in the construction of knowledge. Nonetheless, all of the techniques of power played a role in the production of knowledge and they were all used for a wide range of purposes.

In all sites, the vast majority of knowledge pertained directly to the formal curriculum. A salient characteristic of the PE site was that the students played a very active role in bringing knowledge into the setting, as opposed to primarily reacting to knowledge introduced by teachers, but most of that knowledge was personal and informal, unrelated to the formal curriculum. Another feature of the institutional settings was that a substantial proportion of knowledge invoked was specific to the institution-to its practices and norms and unrelated to the curriculum. Such a finding, when coupled with the corporeality of the institutional techniques, may help explain the enormous frustration that teachers and some students feel at their inability to get on with teaching and learning.

It is also interesting to note the relatively strong functioning of normalisation in the radical settings (around feminism in the FEM site, and around radical politics and ethical and professional teaching practice in the TE site). Here, we may have some explanation for the kind of "resistance" educators encounter from students when they attempt to enact radical pedagogies. If power relations are inescapable in pedagogy, then whatever techniques are most strongly experienced are likely to encounter resistance. Foucault said "there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised" (Foucault, 1980, p.142). Hence, the schooled body should be understood not only as the primary target of the techniques of disciplinary power, but also as the point where these techniques are resisted and thwarted.

*Proposition 5: In pedagogy, different differences matter*

- the vast majority of knowledge invoked in pedagogical settings does not relate directly to categories of social differentiation such as race, class, and gender
- societal power relations, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, are not all enacted or produced in identical ways in classrooms

When looking at the intersection of data coded for the techniques of power and data coded for categories of social differentiation, a major finding was that race, class, gender, etc., were infrequently the explicit focus of classroom interaction. Such a finding points to the likely importance of a micro-level analysis of pedagogical power that does not commence from *a priori* assumptions about pedagogy's role in the production of structural power relations. Pedagogy is more than a relay for external power relations.

My data show that gender was very different from the other techniques in its legitimacy as a basis for both classroom organisation and classroom discussion. In the Australian context, and I suspect in most other nation-states, it is not legitimate to explicitly organise students on the basis of race, social class, ethnicity, or sexuality (except perhaps in affirmative action type initiatives).

The specific context may make a difference to how certain social dynamics are invoked. For instance, my field sites were fairly homogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity, and they were all middle class with the exception of the working class PE site. It is possible that settings in which race (or ethnicity, or sexuality) are more overt categories of social difference within the class itself will find different techniques playing different roles. For instance, in my study, class and sexuality were addressed primarily through individualising techniques while race and ethnicity corresponded with classifying techniques. Further research would be needed to test whether classes that were composed differently, in terms of these categories, made any difference to the findings. The fact that normalisation and exclusion were major categories in the production of all of the social dynamics, however, suggests that issues of cultural and discursive legitimacy will surround any of these categories of social differentiation. If other nations also see gender as a legitimate basis for social organisation while race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other dynamics occupy different status, then I would expect similar findings to obtain.

As a final point, it appears that the specific configuration of the techniques of power in any setting was attributable more to its institutional location than to its "radicalism". In each site the dominant techniques of power were evident whether or not categories of social differentiation were implicated.

## **Implications**

I anticipate that the core aspects of this theory will hold in relation to any form of pedagogy-whether involving multilingual settings, information technologies, different age groupings (early childhood education to adult education) or different disciplines/subject areas-because pedagogy appears to be characterised by a fundamental set of power relations.

While pedagogy is (or at least these aspects of pedagogy are) deeply cultural, it would appear to be constant across cultural and disciplinary sites. Propositions 1-4 apply to all groups from all backgrounds, no matter how homo- or hetero-geneous in character. Pedagogy will involve the enactment of power relations, will proceed by a limited set of techniques, will operate on the bodies of teachers and students, and will produce knowledge specific to its institutional location and the specific techniques of power which dominate that location. Proposition 5 also will also apply across sites, but highlights both that context might

make a difference to the specific configuration of techniques of power and that social dynamics such as race, class, and gender are likely to be addressed differently (using different techniques of power).

This theory also applies whether education is understood as the development of technical skills or as the development of critical capacities, or as the development of skills needed in the so-called information society. In a sense, this work offers a challenge to the basic search for a culturally sensitive pedagogy, one that works best for a specific group. Instead, it provides an alternative explanation for what Bourdieu sees as "the imposition of the cultural arbitrary" which characterises pedagogy but also highlights the possibility of change, of finding productive pedagogies.

In short, the work I have done thus far on power and pedagogy would suggest that educators:

- 1 Embrace power and use it more knowingly, that is, conscious of power's effects in terms of relations, habitus and discourses produced through pedagogy.
- 2 Recognise the role of pedagogy in the production and circulation of a "world culture" (Ladwig, 1998), acknowledging that pedagogy does involve the imposition of a particular cultural arbitrary that is neither unique nor separate from the pedagogy itself. The micro-level power relations of pedagogy are fundamental to its functioning in and across national and other boundaries.
3. In the search to find better pedagogies, recognise that some efforts will be futile, such as the attempt to rid classrooms of power. As Foucault said, though, his position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.

The 'certainties' about classroom practice outlined in this paper certainly do not ensure outcomes, control classrooms or control students. My hope is that they offer a framework within which educators can continue to strive toward more satisfying classroom practice.

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