

Fejes, Andreas; Fragoso, Antonio

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Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

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Editorial: Mapping power in adult education and learning

Andreas Fejes

Linköping University, Sweden (andreas.fejes@liu.se)

António Fragoso

University of Algarve, Portugal (aalmeida@ualg.pt)

Power is imbued in adult education and learning practices at all levels and in all instances where learning occurs or is said to occur. Power is manifest at the level of policy making where decisions are made of how adult education should be shaped, financed and carried out, in the interaction among students and with the teacher, or, in a learning conversation at the local coffee shop. Historically, power has been an important concept for adult education researchers, as a way to theorize coercion, oppression, repression and the possibilities for resistance to power and empowerment, or map the workings of power and its limitations. Today is no different, as ‘old’ and ‘new’ concepts of power are used, introduced or re-shaped and put to work in adult education.

Even though power has been on the agenda for researchers, current change calls for further consideration of how it permeates and reshapes practices. With the emergence of lifelong learning as a central policy concept from the end of the 20th to the beginning of the 21st century, learning rather than education has become a central notion of policy discourse. Learning is no longer confined to institutions, but signifies all aspects of public and private life. This change is reinforced in current European policies where the integration of work and education as a lifelong learning process is called for (see e.g. European Unit, 2010). This shift in policy has supported new and reconfigured adult education practices, integrating education and work; through the proliferation of practices for the recognition of prior learning and those of work integrated learning (cf. Nicoll & Fejes, 2011), for example. Thus, redefining the lifespan as a lifelong learning process has had significant effects both for policies and practices of education and learning, both in and out of the work-place. This calls for further scrutiny in terms of power.

Power as a contested concept – some examples

Power is a contested concept, studied in a number of scientific fields. In the political sciences power has been viewed as both a subjective and objective construct; power-to and power-over, power as ability or power as influence. In Robert Dahl’s view, the very discipline of political science is defined as the study of power and is about getting others to do things they otherwise would not do. Morriss (1987) created an analysis that bridges social sciences and philosophy, defining power not just as the capacity for intentional action but introducing the semantics of ‘influence’: power defined in terms of a capacity to make one’s aims concrete. From this internalist perspective, people

should be concerned both with their capacity to effect aims and affect others willingly (Murphy, 2011).

Historically, it is possible to trace approaches to power related to the individual, class and the state. Yet some of the theories provided by traditional understandings of power, such as functionalism or symbolic interactionism, fail to adequately place or explain lived experience within those frames. Power is also commonly theorised as something that gains visibility when exercised. In this sense it is essentially associated with coercion and repression. The centrality of coercion as the very nature of power, however, was challenged a long time ago as for example in the writings of Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s. Hegemony was defined by Gramsci as a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are controlled by a single class. It was based in the idea of steering (as opposed to domination), to stress the capacity of a class to steer the political, intellectual and moral direction of society. So, although domination without direction is possible, hegemony is generally achieved by force together with the creation and organisation of consensus (Mayo, 1999). In this framework, dominant cultural relations are maintained through the active participation of social actors. As Wilson argues:

With these normalised power relations as the central reality of modern life, the new social analyses focus on revealing relations of domination and subject positions by asking the questions of how discourse is involved in the construction of knowledge, power, and identity. (Wilson, 1999, p. 87)

Habermas (2003), a more contemporary writer, and one of the members of the second generation of the Frankfurt school, has a different approach in his project to find ways to provide norms for non-dominating relations. By accounting for the pathologies of the contemporary society, he argues it is possible to identify a communicative rationality (and a communicative action, free and critical) that offers positive resistance to instrumental rationality, in the sense that it is arrested by an instrumental logic that uncovers domination. For Habermas (2003), although power cannot act unless legitimated by law, at the same time it generates law, and the necessary authority to exert power is generated through political power. The political organization of citizens, not only holds legitimacy as the basis of the state administration, but could or should guide political power. So power is expressed through convictions that are produced by shared inter-subjective discourses, demanding a public space in which free communication exists as a right. In short, power can be constituted as a means of political emancipation, or as social power, when citizens are free to use their participation and communicative political rights.

From a very different perspective, Foucault (1980, 2007) has convincingly argued that power is not coercive but constitutive, deriving from and being exercised through, technologies of sign systems, of production, technologies of power and technologies of the self. Foucault brings us notions of power in which the destructive, repressive or excluding visions of power are tactically substituted by its creative possibilities. There is no one who 'holds' power. Rather, power is relational and operates through actions, in the same way as action modifies other actions within the relationships of groups or individuals. Rather than asking who holds power, what is power and where does it come from, Foucault asks the how questions of power. By asking 'how', the focus is on how power is exercised, the means by which it is exercised, what happens through this exercise of power and its effects. It is through the operation of power that people are produced as subjects and come to know who they are. Maybe one of Foucault's main contributions is to show us how the exercise of power is done through simple

instruments, and he helps us to discover everyday human mechanisms closely related to our own subjectivity (cf. Fejes & Nicoll, 2014).

These are just a few notions of power available to take up, reshape and mobilise in research. They bring different foci to the fore of researchers interest, may it be in the uncovering of power and its consequences as a way to pave way for disadvantaged groups to free themselves of oppression, or a focus on spaces where people can freely use their political rights, or on how discourses shape our subjectivities. They are based on different epistemological and ontological starting points, but what brings them and other notions of power together, is their potential to do something to our understanding of practices of the education and learning of adults.

Mapping power in adult education and learning

In adult education and learning research many different notions of power have been taken up from writers such as Gramsci, Habermas, Foucault, Latour, Mouffe etc. Some authors have had a substantial impact on practices of adult education, e.g. the work of Paulo Freire, who's writing, although not referring explicitly to theories of power, defended those who, in simply reflecting imperial voices, do not have a voice (Freire, 1987). The processes posited for the liberation of the oppressed were closely linked to a shift from what Freire (1972, p. 45) called 'a banking' education, 'where the students are depositories and the teachers is the depositor' to an education for liberation, which was not neutral nor denied the political dimensions of education. This shift involved a process of 'conscientisation' that not only made people aware of dominating structures but also implicated collective action in the pursuit of social transformation. Conscientisation was therefore conceived as an educational dialectical process, involving mutual learning processes, based in 'dialogical' relationships (Freire, 1997).

Power is then a contested terrain where different notions of power are put into play and debated by researchers. And current change in adult education and learning policies and practices calls for further such debate. We have used the concept of 'mapping' as part of the title for this thematic issue, so as to signify the need to map power, i.e. to describe the working of power within practices of adult education and learning. To create debate, there is a need for 'description', made by drawing on the different theorizations of power. For this thematic issue we have thus invited papers that engage in mapping power in adult education and learning.

The articles of this issue

The articles included in this thematic issue map a diversity of research approaches and different ways of analysing power. However, and maybe not so surprisingly, the notions of power mobilised in the articles are inscribed in critical pedagogy or poststructuralist traditions (for a discussion of the field in terms of 'theory' see Fejes & Nicoll, 2013).

Within a critical theoretical tradition, drawing on neo-Marxist notions of power, David W. Livingstone explores relations between professional power and social recognition of specialized knowledge. More specifically this is an exploration of the relations between professional groups and workplace power, in relation to differences in professional schooling and further education. It is a class analysis in which the author argues that class positions should be generally incorporated in studies of professional power and particularly in examining variations in professional learning. In another context, although also within a critical theoretical tradition, António Lopes looks at the

events of May 68 in France to question the power and social role of the University. Drawing on Althusser and Foucault, his paper reflects on the power-effects of the scientific discourses of the University and on how power was contested in a period of deep ideological and political fracture that contributed to the democratisation of higher education.

Three articles, in different ways, draw on the work of Michel Foucault in analysing different practices of the education and learning of adults. Kerry Harman traces the different realities of workplace learning using a Foucauldian notion of power as distributed, relational and productive. She argues that in examining workplace learning the notion of multiple realities goes beyond a single, fixed angle of reality, to a notion of reality as performed in and through a diversity of practices. Liselott Aarsand draws on Foucault's notion of governmentality to investigate the case of parenting, and so as to highlight selves and self-work in narrations of family life in Norway. She argues that parenting is a powerful educative practice in the fabrication of the capable citizens of contemporary times. Susan Holloway and Patricia Gouthro, use a Foucauldian notion of power and of the 'author function' to problematise the relationship between fiction, citizenship, and lifelong learning. Their article analyses the ambivalent outcomes of shifting elements of power in Canadian publishing, stressing the importance of fiction and adult learning in shaping discourses of citizenship and critical social learning.

Rather than drawing on a specific notion of power, Sigrid Nolda stresses the importance of interactional studies when observing and identifying power based on various types of data. Observation in adult education classrooms and counselling sessions depends not only on the notions of power underlying the studies, but also on the data types produced and methods applied for their interpretation. Nolda raises the critical question of whether the identification of power by adult education researchers can be considered a power practice.

The last paper in this issue is an open paper. Here Juan Carlos Pita Castro, drawing on a biographical perspective, focuses on processes of art school graduates bifurcation in their movement from initial training to work. Bifurcation signifies a need to work on the self, rather than indicating a 'predictable stage in a trajectory' as does the concept of transition. He has a specific focus on the links between identity, agency and the social environment and illustrates how a loss of certain elements in the environment lead to the realisation that identity and agency are related.

Ending note

The articles in this thematic issue, only represents a few of many notions of power, and ways of mobilising power in adult education and learning research. However, with their differences, they are also contributions in the work of mapping power in adult education research.

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