

Articles

UNMASKING POWER: FOUCAULT AND ADULT LEARNING

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Abstract

Adult educators talk emphatically of empowerment as a process through which adult learners find their voices and develop the self-confidence to take control of their lives. Empowering adults has come to signify what is distinctive and admirable about the field. Michel Foucault, the French social theorist, developed an analysis of productive power co-existing to different degrees as repression and liberation. Foucault maintains that, in modern society, sovereign power (exercised from above by a clearly discernible authority) has been replaced by disciplinary power (exercised by people on themselves and others in their lives). An appreciation of Foucault's ideas can help adult educators avoid a naïve understanding of how power manifests itself in their daily practices—particularly the false face of apparently beneficent power exercised to help adult learners realize their full potential.

Résumé

Les éducateurs d'adultes mettent de l'avant l'empowerment en tant que processus permettant aux apprenants de trouver leurs voix et de développer leur confiance en soi en vue de prendre le contrôle de leurs vies. L'empowerment des adultes en est arrivé à référer à ce qui est distinctif et admirable dans le domaine. Michel Foucault a élaboré une analyse du pouvoir de production qui co-existe à différents degrés comme force de répression et de libération. Foucault soutient que dans la société moderne le pouvoir souverain (celui exercé d'en haut par une autorité identifiable) a été remplacé par un pouvoir disciplinaire (exercé par les gens sur eux-mêmes, sur leur vie et sur celles d'autres personnes dans leur entourage). Un examen des vues de Foucault pourrait aider les éducateurs d'adultes à dépasser une compréhension naïve de la manière dont le pouvoir se manifeste dans leurs activités courantes, particulièrement l'image erronée du pouvoir apparemment bénéfique exercé dans le but d'aider les apprenants adultes à réaliser leur plein potentiel.

In recent years the ideas of Michel Foucault have captured the attention of some adult educators, who claim that the dynamics and contradictions of power are not being fully taken up in a field of practice that places the project of empowering adults at its center. To many adult educators power is a Janus-like phenomenon, presenting two contradictory faces—repressive and liberatory. Repressive power constrains and coerces, bending its subjects to its will. Liberatory power animates and activates, helping people take control of their lives. In adult education the liberatory face of power turns its gaze full force on the field. Adult educators talk emphatically of empowerment as a process through which adult learners find their voices and develop the self-confidence to take control of their lives. The possibility of converting *power over* learners into *power with* them continues to exercise a hold on educators' imaginations (Kreisberg, 1992). The determination to empower adults has taken its place in the pantheon of progressive-humanist sentiments that signifies to many adult educators what is distinctive and admirable about the field. At the meetings of national adult educational associations I have attended in England (NIACE), Canada (CAAE), and the United States (AAACE) over the past 20 years, sooner or later conference participants and speakers point with pride to the empowering aspects of their practice.

A critique of this bipolar approach to understanding power lies at the heart of Foucault's work. In his view power rarely is unitary and often is contradictory. The same practices that are experienced as repressive by some are viewed as liberatory by others. For Foucault (1980), power is productive; it "produces effects at the level of desire" (p. 59). In human relations repression and liberation co-exist to different degrees wherever power is present. Hence, "it would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of subordination which, by definition, are means of escape" (1982, p. 225). Foucault has written historical analyses of madness, sexuality, mechanisms of punishment, and the way discourses emerge that construct dominant understandings of these, but a unifying concern running through all his writings is the understanding of power. Foucault maintains that in modern society sovereign power (power exercised from above by a clearly discernible authority such as a monarch or a president) has been replaced by disciplinary power—power that is exercised by people on others and on themselves in the specific day-to-day practices of their lives.

Despite the explosion of scholarship on Foucault, I find that graduate students consistently report his writing to be incomprehensible. In particular, they find it difficult to grasp his central contentions regarding the complex operation of power relations and practices when these are surrounded by the minutiae of historical observation and social chronicling, at which he excels.

So one purpose of this paper is to provide a relatively accessible entry point to Foucault's work for those struggling with it, and to underscore the valuable work of other adult educators (Tennant, 1998; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997; Usher & Edwards, 1995; Usher & Solomon, 1999) who have traced his relevance to the practices of the field. Rather than locating this article in this secondary literature of adult educational commentaries, I have returned to the source and tried to re-trace Foucault's relevance for adult education as much as possible using his own words. My hope is that after reading this article students and researchers alike might be encouraged to go back and try again to read Foucault in the original.

Anyone who claims that adult education is about empowering adult learners (in my experience a majority of those who identify themselves as adult educators) can benefit from engaging with Foucault. However, his writing is sometimes difficult to follow, and it is easy to give up. Nevertheless, the struggle to understand and to apply his ideas is worth it. Without an appreciation of Foucault's ideas, we adult educators often end up with an incomplete and naïve understanding of how power manifests itself in adult educational processes. His work is crucial in helping us learn to recognize the presence of power in our daily practices, particularly the false face of apparently beneficent power exercised to help adult learners realize their full potential.

The Centrality of Power to Human Relations

A central point in Foucault's analysis is that power is omnipresent, etched into the minutiae of everyone's daily lives, and exercised continually by those whom critical theory usually describes as *the masses*. This is in marked contrast to a view which sees power as possessed chiefly by a dominant elite, exercised from above, and emanating from a central location *that is clearly identifiable*. To Foucault (1980), "power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (p. 39). Consequently, his study of power has concentrated on understanding its manifestation in everyday rituals and interactions. He studies power "at the extreme points of its exercise ... where it installs itself and produces real effects" (p. 197). In adult education the extreme points of exercise are the configurations of specific practices—dialogic circles, learning journals, self-directed learning contracts, and so on—claimed to be distinctive to the field.

The Importance of Foucault's Ideas for Adult Educators

Thanks to the efforts of Usher and Edwards (1994), Britton (1996), Bagnall (1999), and others, Foucaultian concepts—disciplinary power, the Panopticon, technologies of the self, the normalizing gaze, confessional practices—have gradually entered the discourse of adult education. If critical theory dominated adult education theorizing in the 1980s, postmodernism and post-structuralism, especially the ideas of Foucault, held sway in the 1990s. Given this attention, why publish yet another paper analyzing the relevance of Foucault's ideas for adult education?

Those educators who brush against Foucault's cheek often come away feeling depressed and hopeless. They see him as irredeemably nihilistic and perverse, depriving them of the prospect of a pedagogy of hope (see Freire, 1994). Hope is the oxygen of activism, and if it is not immediately offered there is a temptation to abandon a particular writer as having nothing useful to contribute to the struggle. I believe this negative perception ignores the ways Foucault's own life and work explore resistances. There is hope in Foucault, albeit a measured hope implicit in his analysis of specific sites and contexts of localized struggles. In all the millennial hoopla of cyberspace, digital technology, and on-line practice of adult education, Foucault is now in danger of seeming passé (though Boshier & Wilson's, 1998, application of the Panopticon to analyzing the surveillance possibilities inherent in web based courses shows his continuing relevance). I believe his analysis of power relations is enduring and has changed dramatically how adult educators will look at their own practices for many years to come, and that the reasons for this endurance need to be re-stated.

From a Foucaultian perspective adult educators learn far more about power by studying the micro-dynamics of particular learning groups in particular classrooms (the gestures, body posture, seating arrangements, facial tics, and phrases that learners and teachers commonly utter) than by investigating how adult education is funded. The growth of corporate training and human capital development may be important trends in the field, and the passing of adult educational legislation may seem an important political event, but Foucault (1980) maintains that this is not where power is primarily exercised. For him the only way to understand power is to investigate "how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors" (p. 97).

For example, in an adult education discussion group, disciplinary power is exercised in practices such as the raising of hands to signify one wants to

speak; the way eye contact is made between students, or between teacher and student, to confer the message that now a chosen participant can speak; the nods of learner and teacher approval to register that a particularly insightful comment has been made; the preferred seating arrangement (usually a circle); and the form of speech and terminology that is approved. Foucault observes that modern society is so complex that a permanent army of police and informers would be necessary to make sure people accepted prevailing power relations. As this is logistically impossible, he argues that overt surveillance has been replaced by self-surveillance—that individuals monitor and censor one's own thoughts and behaviors in adult education discussion groups and elsewhere.

The Origin of Power

Foucault's (1980) analysis of power starts at the bottom, with the everyday thoughts and actions of "ordinary" people. He describes his method of focusing on everyday practices and behaviors as an ascending analysis of power. An ascending analysis begins by studying "infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics" (p. 99). He then describes how these are co-opted "by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination" (p. 99). This approach stands in marked contrast to a top-down analysis of power, whereby a central supervisory agency is identified (for example one with responsibility for accrediting adult education programs) and the focus is on studying how this agency extends its control ever more widely by forcing people to behave in a certain way. Foucault believes that a top-down analysis is too deterministic and gives far too much weight to a dominant group's ability to make the world behave as it wishes.

In Foucault's (1980) view, power relations are infinitely diverse and contextual. They originate in unpredictable ways at particular times and places. A dominant group does not set out to create a set of mechanisms of control designed to bolster its authority. What really happens is that members of this group begin to realize that specific practices have arisen that could "become economically advantageous and politically useful" (p. 101) in maintaining the dominant group's position. Whenever a dominant group perceives that certain practices might prove useful to them then "as a natural consequence, all of a sudden, they came to be colonized and maintained by global mechanisms and the entire state system" (p. 101). So, in Foucault's view, the establishment of societal mechanisms of control is haphazard and accidental rather than deliberately organized. Those who desire to maintain the system as it is wait till a specific configuration of power relations and

practices emerges that can be co-opted to support the functioning of that system. This serendipitous configuration is then seized upon and incorporated to serve ends that are often contradictory to the configuration's intent.

An adult educational example of this, discussed in Usher and Edwards' (1994) analysis of postmodern education, is the accreditation of adults' prior experiential learning. Acknowledging the validity of adults' prior learning experiences emerged originally as a counter-cultural, experimental practice. It was an innovative way of challenging the sterility and rigidity of formal conceptions of learning embedded in higher educational curricula. Proponents of recognizing prior learning for adults accused colleges and universities of denigrating and excluding the knowledge and experience adults bring to their studies. To them it was insulting to make adults take introductory courses in subjects where adult learners sometimes had more experience than the instructor. To challenge this position some adult educators argued that people's everyday knowledge should be taken as seriously as the knowledge that was codified and transmitted within the academy. To this end they advocated the establishment of systems of portfolio assessment whereby adult learners could have their prior learning acknowledged and college credit granted.

Initially the accreditation of adults' prior learning was regarded by many within academe as an irrelevant soft option favored by a few woolly minded liberals working in fringe institutions. To put this into Foucault's (1980) terminology, adults' experiential learning represented a subjugated knowledge, one of "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (p. 82). Over time, however, those in authority have realized that the practices associated with experiential learning present a happy set of circumstances ripe for co-opting in support of the dominant system.

In Foucault's (1980) analysis this is a predictable development. Subjugated knowledges "are no sooner accredited and put into circulation, than they run the risk of re-codification, recolonization" (p. 86). This has arguably been the fate of some experiential learning initiatives placed within formal educational institutions. Initially, systems for accrediting prior learning flourish as oppositional practices. After a period of time, however, colleges start "to annex them, to take them back within the fold of their own discourse" (p. 86). Usher and Edwards (1994) suggest that "experiential learning is fast becoming a central object in a powerful and oppressive discourse" (p. 206) as governments bypass professional teachers to establish

assessment and accreditation mechanisms that value certain forms of experience and learning (particularly those that are vocationally related to information technology) over others. In their view “the turn to experience is a means of by-passing experienced practitioners and negating the power of their professional judgment ... thereby transforming experience into a commodity to be exchanged for credit towards qualifications” (p. 204).

A Synaptic Economy of Power

Foucault (1980) examines the way power is present in the smallest, apparently most inconsequential, human interaction. He views power as something embedded in the everyday lives of citizens and in the everyday activities of adult learners and educators. He posits “a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise *within* the social body, rather than *from above* it” (p. 39). Power flows around the body politic, and around the adult education classroom, rather than being located at one clearly discernible point. Hence, “power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain” (p. 98). It is continually in use, always being renewed, altered and challenged by all those individuals who exercise it. Foucault writes that “power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power ... individuals are the vehicles of power” (p. 98).

This view of power as all-pervasive and exercised by individuals at all levels challenges the discourse common in the neo-Marxist critical theory of the Frankfurt school, whereby power is used in a repressive way to enforce ideological manipulation. According to this view those who possess power (the dominant group, power elite, or ruling class) use this possession to keep subjugated groups in place. But once we as researchers admit that “power is exercised rather than possessed” (Foucault, 1977a, p. 26) then the question of how one group maintains its hegemony over another becomes much harder to answer. Instead of identifying those social mechanisms that bend the masses to the will of an elite group, we have to shift our attention to studying how individuals’ idiosyncratic and specific actions intersect in everyday life to keep a system going in the absence of force clearly exercised from above. Rejecting the notion that power is a commodity that is possessed only by those clearly identified as powerful also challenges the idea that social life—or adult educational practices—can be divided into opposing spheres of repression and freedom.

Foucault (1980) criticizes the belief that society at large and localized practices—such as adult education—contain zones of freedom uncontaminated by the presence of power. In his words, “it seems to me that power *is* already there, that one is never ‘outside’ it, that there are no ‘margins’ for those who break with the system to gambol in” (p. 14). The omnipresence of power means we adult educators have to accept that all of us, at all times, are implicated in its workings. We must accept that “power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network” (p. 142).

This is an analysis that many adult educators may reject entirely, arguing that in comparison with other fields of educational practice theirs is much freer. It is not uncommon to hear it argued that in adult educational settings learners have the chance to experience an open, democratic process liberated from the distortions and constraints imposed on them by the requirements of K–12 education. Those adult educators with humanistic, progressive, or radical sympathies take pride in their commitment to letting adult educators take control of their learning. They encourage adults to define their own curriculum, run their own classes, and evaluate their own progress. A belief in the possibility that adults can be responsible for their personal and political self-actualization seems inherently liberatory.

Foucault would have us think otherwise. To him, power relations are manifest in all adult educational interactions, even those that seem the freest and most unconstrained. As an example, think of an adult educational practice that appears to equalize power relations, if not escape from them entirely: the circle. Some three decades ago a colleague jokingly asked me “how do you recognize an adult educator at a party?” The response “she’s the one moving the chairs into a circle” hit home, because almost my first action as an adult educator was to get to my first ever class early and move the chairs into a circle. In so doing, I felt I had demonstrated admirably my commitment to honoring learners’ voices and experiences, and removing my own coercive power from the educational setting.

The circle is so sacred and reified in adult education as to be an unchallengeable sign of practitioners’ democratic purity and learner-centeredness. However, following Foucault, it is quite possible that the discussion circle may be experienced by participants as a situation in which the possibility of surveillance is dramatically heightened. Usher and Edwards (1994) write that although putting chairs in a circle

may create different discursive possibilities, it nonetheless simply reconfigures the regulation of students. They may not be so directly

subject to the teacher/lecturer but they remain under the immediate scrutiny and surveillance of their peers. ... changing practices do not, then, do away with power but displace it and reconfigure it in different ways. (p. 91)

In a circle students know that their lack of participation, or their poorly articulated contribution, will be all the more evident to their peers.

Gore (1993) builds on Foucault's work to argue that beneath the circle's democratic veneer there may exist a much more troubling and ambivalent reality. For adult learners who are confident, loquacious, and used to academic culture the circle holds relatively few terrors. It is an experience that is congenial, authentic, and liberating. But for adults who are shy; aware of their different skin color, physical appearance, or form of dress; unused to intellectual discourse; intimidated by disciplinary jargon and the culture of academe; or conscious of their accent or lack of vocabulary, the circle can be a painful and humiliating experience. These learners have been stripped of their right to privacy. They are denied the chance to check adult educators out by watching them closely before deciding whether or not they can be trusted. This trust only develops over time as teachers are seen to act consistently, honestly, and fairly. Yet the circle, with its implicit pressure to participate and perform, may preclude the time and opportunity for this trust to develop. As such, it is a prime example of how apparently democratic adult education practices exhibit power relations just as much as those labeled as autocratic or overly didactic.

Disciplinary Power

Foucault subsumes many of his most important ideas within a single concept, that of disciplinary power. In seeking to illuminate the way power operates in complex, diverse, technologically advanced societies, he argues that the 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the rise of a new economy of power—disciplinary power. This new economy ensured “the circulation of effects of power through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions” (1980, p. 152). This disciplinary power is based on “knowing the inside of people's minds” (1982, p. 214) and this is in many ways more insidious, more sinister, than the workings of sovereign power.

Although most people entering the 21st century still think of power in sovereign terms (that is, as located in a clearly identifiable individual or political unit) Foucault believes that a new economy of power—disciplinary power—emerged 200 to 300 years ago. This economy established “procedures which allowed the effects of power to circulate in a manner at

once continuous, uninterrupted, adopted and 'individualized' throughout the entire social body" (1980, p. 119). Disciplinary power exhibits an "attentive malevolence" (1977a, p. 139) and is "a type of power which is constantly exercised by means of surveillance" (1980, p. 104). It is seen most explicitly in the functioning of prisons, but its mechanisms are also at play in schools, factories, social service agencies, and adult education. This form of power turns lifelong learning (currently a politically favoured term and therefore a strong contender to replace adult learning as the organizing concept for the field) into a lifelong nightmare of "hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification" (1977a, p. 220).

Consistent with his belief that power relations are not deliberately engineered by a secretive, dominant elite, Foucault (1977a) emphasizes the element of arbitrary chance that lies behind the emergence of disciplinary power. As he sees it, "a multitude of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location, [which] overlap, repeat, or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method" (p. 138). The rationale underlying the general method of disciplinary power was that of breaking up groups and collectivities into separate units that could be subjected to individual surveillance. These individual units could then be inveigled into eventually surveying themselves.

Disciplinary power exhibits spatial and temporal dimensions. It divides space "into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed ... to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 143). Adult learners are separated into individual cubicles and study carrels, or behind individual computer terminals, working on individual projects. Professional examinations are taken, essays written, and adult education graduate theses submitted, as individual acts of intellectual labor. The collective learning represented by three or four adult graduate students writing a dissertation together as a collaborative project, or two or three adult education professors combining to co-author scholarly articles, is discouraged as a plagiaristic diversion of the intellectually weak. Disciplinary power also breaks down time "into separate and adjusted threads" (p. 158) by arranging learning in a sequence of discrete stages. Adult training and professional practice are detached from each other, the adult curriculum is divided into elements for which predetermined amounts of time are allocated, and the timetable becomes the pivotal reference point for the organization of adult learners' and adult educators' activities.

A central mechanism of disciplinary power is the examination. The examination has “the triple function of showing whether the subject has reached the level required, of guaranteeing that each subject undergoes the same apprenticeship and of differentiating the abilities of each individual” (Foucault, 1977a, p. 158). Those who go through a series of examinations have their lives fixed and recorded in documents that make up “a whole meticulous archive constituted in terms of bodies and days” (p. 189). People are sorted, classified, and differentiated by the examination, which functions as “a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” (p. 184). When people’s achievements and aptitudes are judged by the examination, then they enter “the age of examinatory justice” (p. 305) in which “the judges of normality are present everywhere” (p. 304).

Surveillance and the Panopticon

Self-surveillance is the most important component of disciplinary power. In a society subject to disciplinary power, as individuals we discipline ourselves. There is no need for the coercive state apparatus to spend enormous amounts of time and money making sure we behave correctly because we are watching ourselves to make sure we don’t step out of line. What makes us watch ourselves so assiduously is not an internal resolve to follow normal ways of thinking and acting, thereby avoiding a fall into disgrace. Instead, we watch ourselves because we sense that our attempt to stay close to the norm is itself being watched by another, all-seeing, presence. We carry within us the sense that “out there”, in some hidden, undiscoverable location, “they” are constantly observing us. It is hard to deviate from the norm if you feel your thoughts and actions are being recorded (figuratively and sometimes literally) by cameras hidden in every corner of your life.

For Foucault (1977a) “the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly” (p. 173) and for those being surveyed to be aware that at any time they may be subject to invisible scrutiny. Those under surveillance are subject to the “principle of compulsory visibility ... [which] assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them ... [I]t is the fact of constantly being seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in all his [*sic*] subjection” (p. 187). As well as being very effective, self-surveillance is cheap. Foucault (1980) is almost rhapsodic in his appreciation of its utilitarian elegance:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under Its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he [*sic*] is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimal cost. (p. 155)

The principle of compulsory visibility is most perfectly realized in the panopticon. Designed by Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon describes a prison system in which prison cells are organized in a circle around a single tower inhabited by guards. Because the cells are backlit but the tower is not, the guards can see into all the cells but the prisoners cannot see into the tower. Consequently, any single prisoner can never be sure that he or she is not the object of surveillance. This is "an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust" (Foucault, 1980, p. 158) in which inmates themselves are the bearers of power. It works on the principles of the visibility of the inmate and the unverifiability of the disciplinary gaze; "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked on at any moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 201).

In Foucault's view, panoptism is the organizing principle of disciplinary power in contemporary society, "a technological invention in the order of power comparable with the steam engine in the order of production" (1980, p. 151). Organizations and institutions throughout society induce in people "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1977a, p. 201). In cars, car parks, high streets, workplaces, shops, elevators, hotels, airports, malls, banks, even schools and colleges, we can see cameras trained on us. We know that somewhere in a place we cannot see a security guard has an image of us on one of a bank of screens. Of course, we can never be sure this guard has chosen to look at the particular screen containing our image, or even that the guard has not gone temporarily to the bathroom, but we can never be absolutely sure he or she is not there. Better to be safe than sorry, then, and behave as if we were being watched.

Foucault (1977a) is explicit in his belief that panoptism pervades education just as much as any other human activity: "a relation of surveillance, defined and regulated, is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency" (p. 176). Examinations, timetables, student-of-the-month awards, gold stars, end-of-term reports, student workbooks, and learning portfolios all combine to make learners aware that their presence within the system is being monitored constantly.

An awareness of this fact by the “lads” featured in Willis’s (1981) study of English secondary education was so strong that they spent a good part of their lives scheming to avoid it. By finding places where they were confident of being unobserved, and by creating their own timetables of activity which had little to do with the school’s functioning, they were able to reduce the effects of disciplinary time and space.

In an interesting application of Foucault’s ideas to the on-line practice of adult education, Boshier and Wilson (1998) argue that web-based courses (often thought to be learner centered, decentralized, and flexible) can function in a panoptic fashion. Participation in chat room discussion is mandated and observed by the web master, who creates an archival paper trail documenting the learner’s activities. Boshier and Wilson quote one site where irony is used to let students know they are being observed: “our club wielding Pinkerton agents, who keep us informed about the daily activities of suspicious History 102 students, inform us that quite a few rebels decided to postpone viewing Lecture 21 for a few days” (p. 46). Students know that a meticulous and comprehensive record of the web sites they access (including even e-mail messages they send then delete) can be recreated at any time in the future. So an educational process often touted as freeing adult learners from the need to attend courses at particular physical locations and pre-set times, and praised as allowing them to set their own pace for learning, can easily replicate some of the surveillance mechanisms of the panopticon.

Power, Knowledge, and Truth

One of the reasons Foucault’s work is so interesting to adult educators is that it constantly illuminates the relationship between power and knowledge. Whoever is in a position of power is able to create knowledge supporting that power relationship. Whatever a society accepts as knowledge or truth inevitably ends up strengthening the power of some and limiting the power of others. Foucault (1980) emphasizes, “the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely knowledge constantly induces effects of power ... it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (p. 52). If this is so, then one of the social institutions identified as having the prime function of creating knowledge and truth—education (including adult education)—inevitably comes under scrutiny. After all it is in educational institutions that people learn standards for determining truth and are taught whatever comprises the official knowledge (Apple, 2000) of that society.

According to Foucault (1980) there is “an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge” (p.

69) that comprise a number of connected mechanisms. These mechanisms determine how knowledge is accumulated by prescribing correct procedures for observing, researching, and recording data, and for disseminating the results of investigations. Such mechanisms of knowledge production are really control devices, and those with the greatest command of them are able to create dominant discourses and regimes of truth (two terms very much associated with Foucault).

A dominant discourse comprises a particular language, a distinctive worldview in which some things are regarded as inherently more important or true than others, a set of concepts that are held in common by those participating in discourse, rules for judging what are good or bad (acceptable or inappropriate) contributions, and procedures that are applied to determine who may be allowed to join the discourse community. Dominant discourses inevitably support existing power structures and are vital to them. According to Foucault (1980), "relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourse" (p. 93).

Discourses are sometimes at odds with each other; subjugated discourses or minority discourses can occasionally hold sway in particular social enclaves. The Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) is arguably such an enclave. It has no professional organization sponsoring or supporting it, and basically works as a small nomadic tribe wandering the North American continent and pitching an annual camp at ever-changing locations. The dominant discourses at AERC are those of critical theory and postmodernism. Move outside this enclave into the wider world of regional and national adult education professional association meetings and the dominant discourses are those of human capital development, self-direction, experiential learning, and liberal humanism. Those involved in the discourses of learning organizations, lifelong learning, and learning at the workplace can be very comfortable at national professional association meetings, but feel that they are regarded as pariahs or unsophisticates—capitalist lackeys co-opted by mammon and dominant power—when participating in scholarly and research discourses that critique these interests and practices.

When particular discourses coincide and overlap they comprise what Foucault calls a regime of truth. In a frequently quoted passage, Foucault (1980) maintains:

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true;

the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 133)

Of course, when Foucault uses the term *truth* it is not to describe ideas or knowledge that exhibit some inherent accuracy or undeniable empirical correctness. Truth is a term that describes the system that decides that certain forms of discourse should be allowed. Hence, truth is “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” (p. 133).

Foucault’s writings on the connections between truth, discourse, and power move us as adult educators away from thinking of knowledge about adult learning and adult education as something that is pursued and produced for its own sake by energetic individuals enthusiastically dedicated to the wider edification of the field. Instead, we start to wonder how it is that some writings, some ideas, and some people emerge over others as important in a particular field such as adult education. Foucault prompts us to ask why certain adult educational books get published, why certain questions seem to come naturally to the forefront in professional conversations, how contributors to handbooks of adult education are chosen, why certain adult educational journals become more venerated than others, and how it is that certain concepts and theories come to frame the research activities of others. We start to link the emergence of new research agendas or theoretical frameworks to the way these support, or at least do not challenge, the politics of truth that exist within the social and academic community of adult educators.

Power, Resistance, and the Role of Adult Educators

In analyses of disciplinary power and surveillance it is often the regulatory dimensions of power in Foucault’s work that are stressed. One danger in doing this is to slip into thinking of power as wholly repressive or constraining. Foucault (1980) is constantly on the alert for this misconception because of his view that power does not just prevent things happening, it also “produces effects at the level of desire” (p. 59). He argues:

If power were anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that ... it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. (p. 119)

Power must therefore be considered "as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (p. 119). If power does indeed produce effects at the level of desire, then one of the most desired of all the effects it produces is a desire in adult learners and adult educators to resist manipulation and to fight oppression.

The Promises of Resistance

One of the most common reactions to reading Foucault on the panoptic nature of contemporary society, and the way possibilities for surveillance are woven into all aspects of adult education, is to feel defeated by the omnipresence of power. As adult educators we can easily collapse into total despair regarding the possibility of ever unraveling the interwoven and shifting configurations of power and knowledge. This collapse is unwarranted in the light of two aspects of Foucault's work. First, there are elements in his analysis that stress the real possibility of adult learners and adult educators mounting some local resistance. Although he alerts us to the way dominant discourses and regimes of truth insert themselves into the most detailed elements of our daily thoughts and behaviors, he also believes these can be countered at these points of insertion. Adult learning groups always offer the promise of inverting power relations. Second, Foucault's *own life* illustrates how citizens could intervene as adult activists to effect change with regard to specific causes. I examine these two aspects in turn.

According to Foucault (1982), resistance is so central to power relations that it constitutes a plausible starting point for the analysis of power; "in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissassociate these relations" (p. 211). Power always implies the possibility of resistance. Hence, "at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom" (p. 225). Foucault argues it is mistaken to think that the omnipresence of power means that people are pawns in some larger game of chess devised by the dominant group. In Foucault's (1980) view "to say that one can never be 'outside' power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what" (p. 142). Power and resistance are contemporaneous, one always exists as the flip side of the other; "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 are exercised" (p. 142).

So even as he illustrates dramatically the all-pervasive nature of power, and the directive efforts of dominant discourses, Foucault (1982) holds out the promise of resistance. In fact it is not so much the promise as the predictable certainty of resistance. He emphasizes, "There is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight (because) every power relationship implies ... a strategy of struggle" (p. 225). Moreover, the switch from monolithic sovereign power to splintered disciplinary power sometimes makes resistance seem more feasible to activists who can work on a local level on specific projects. Resistance "exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies" (1980, p. 142). The fact that overthrowing the state, reversing the history of patriarchy, or ending racism are not the only options for those resisting power opens up the possibility of smaller scale acts of opposition.

It is also the case that the effects of power relations are often unpredictable and contradictory, unintentionally generating possibilities for resistance. Foucault (1980) maintains that where dominant discourses and regimes are concerned "there are always also movements in the opposite direction, whereby strategies which coordinate relations of power produce new effects and advance into hitherto unaffected domains" (p. 200). As an example of this, consider how the World Wide Web has allowed oppositional groups to organize effectively, or how hackers have been able to wreak havoc in the world of international business by their interventions.

So the advent of disciplinary power does not snuff out opposition or smooth over conflict. On the contrary, its workings allow for "innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles and of an at least temporary inversion of power relations" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 26). Just as disciplinary power exerts pressure on people, so "they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them" (p. 26). This form of control does not produce a society hermetically sealed against incursions. There are always hairline cracks in the fluctuating walls of conformity people see themselves surrounded by. It is to the widening of these cracks (particularly where penal reform was concerned) that Foucault devoted much of his energy.

Exposing Mechanisms of Control

As biographies such as Macey's (1993) demonstrate, Foucault was constantly involved in campaigns directed towards exposing the mechanisms of control that lay behind a range of human service operations, particularly those contained within the penal system. His life exemplified his belief that

intellectuals are not passive, detached observers and recorders of culture and society. What observation they conduct should be undertaken, in Foucault's view, to illuminate for others the specific mechanisms and strategies that those in power use to maintain existing systems. Specifically, intellectuals are to provide instruments of analysis that can help others to locate lines of weakness and strength in power configurations. The role of theory is "to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions, to build little by little a strategic knowledge" (Foucault, 1980, p. 145). Building on his contention that politics is war conducted by other means (a deliberate inversion of Clausewitz's dictum that war is politics conducted by other means), Foucault hoped that intellectuals would produce "a topographical and geographical survey of the battlefield" (p. 62) comprising power relations.

In describing this activity Foucault comes close to invoking Gramsci's (1971) notion of organic intellectuals as educators, persuaders, and activists working within specific social movements, of which they are members. Foucault (1980) declares, "A new mode of the 'connection between theory and practice' has been established. Intellectuals have got used to working ... within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them" (p. 126). Foucault (1977b) re-conceptualizes theorizing as a local and regional "struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is invisible and insidious" (p. 208). Any analysis of power that theorists undertake should be understood as an act of solidarity with those who struggle against it, a contribution to some kind of specific social, cultural, or political intervention. Drawing a topographical map of power's operation is "an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power, and not their illumination from a safe distance" (p. 208). The purpose of illuminating exactly how power works in obscure and hidden ways to uphold the status quo is "to sap power, to take power" (p. 208).

So, instead of working on behalf of humanity, the working class, women, the oppressed, or any other massive social construct, adult educators could fruitfully direct their energies towards specific projects. Educational reforms, teaching practices, housing policies, psychiatric protocols, prison organization all offer opportunities for intellectuals to intervene in ways that contravene dominant power. In Foucault's case this involved him working for penal reform through the Prison Information Group, joining the Jaubert commission to investigate the arrest and beating of the science journalist, Alain Jaubert, and being arrested himself at many demonstrations supporting prison hunger strikers, North African immigrants, and Klaus Croissant (a

German lawyer who defended the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang). He helped establish the socialist newspaper *Liberation* and refused to meet then President of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing if he (Foucault) was not allowed to raise the case of Christian Ranucci, who had been guillotined for murder. He also worked on causes outside France by publicizing the struggles of Soviet dissidents, supporting the Boat for Vietnam committee to provide relief for Vietnamese boat people, and joining a convoy to take supplies to Warsaw during the struggle of the Solidarity movement to challenge the legitimacy of the Soviet-installed Polish regime. Foucault's life illustrates his belief that "theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice" (1982, p. 208).

Applying Foucault's Ideas to Adult Educators' Practices

As adult educators, what can we draw from Foucault's work toward building a critical theory of adult learning? Perhaps the overriding insight is the need to study how adults learn to recognize that they are themselves agents of power, perpetually channeling disciplinary power, but also possessing the capacity to subvert dominant power relations. Many adults (including many adult educators) either maintain that they have no power over others, or that they can choose when—and when not—to exercise it. Foucault views such confidence with amusement. He sketches out a theory of power as a circular flow that draws all into its currents. Choosing whether or not to exercise power is, in his eyes, an illusioned choice. In reality we are fated to exercise power. If we accept the view that exercising power is unavoidable, then a theory of adult learning would study how it is that adults become aware of that fact, and what happens to them when they do. More specifically, such a theory would have as a prime purpose the critical analysis of those adult educational practices that either purport to be power-free or attempt to democratize power.

Using Foucault's technique of an ascending analysis, it is revealing to examine common adult learning practices that are celebrated for their intent to avoid the exercise of power by involving all participants equally. Adult educators do not need Foucault to help recognize the exercise of sovereign power in practice. This is seen in the lecturer who treats a group of adults as if they were 10 year olds, allowing few questions and no unauthorized interruptions; the instructor who tells adults students they will drop a whole letter grade each time they are late for class; the teacher who tells an adult student (who is a mother) that because she missed a class she must bring a note from her aging father excusing her absence. (In case you think these examples extreme, I have come across all of them in my work during the past

year.) This kind of sovereign power is easily detected and usually discredited by those within the field who see themselves as "true" adult educators, dedicated to empowering learners in a respectful way. What Foucault helps one recognize is that another, more subtle form of power—disciplinary power—is often present in practices that are usually thought of as democratic and participatory.

The circle and the accreditation of prior learning are two examples of student-centered adult education that I have already mentioned as sometimes embodying disciplinary power. Other prime candidates for the label of power-free practices might be the use of learning journals (introduced to honor adults' experiences and to help them develop their own voices), the use of learning contracts (designed to cede to adults the power to choose, design, and evaluate their learning), and teaching through discussion (intended to avoid the tendency of adult educators to move to center stage as didactic transmitters of content in the classroom). Each of these practices appears to avoid the reproduction of dominant power and to constitute the "temporary inversion of power relations" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 26). Yet, even as these practices are celebrated for their emancipatory intent, and even as they constitute an adult educational regime of truth of liberatory self-actualization, adult educators can apply Foucault's ideas to generate a very different perspective on them.

Learner-centered practices focusing on the self—for example, self-direction and self-actualization achieved through individually designed contracts—can be regarded as constituting a technology of the self (Tennant, 1998, p. 366). Individualizing instruction via learning journals and contracts can also be interpreted as an instance of disciplinary power in that it helps the system "be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities and merits" (1977a, p. 143). Through learning contracts adult learners become their own overseers. Central to such contracts are criteria for judging the worth of the learner's work, and a timetable for the achievement of the contract's specified objectives. Good adult students devote themselves to producing proper examples of the specified work on time, and hold themselves to meeting the conditions of the contract to the best of their abilities. The contract becomes reified, assuming an identity and presence separate from the intents that framed it. As a controlling influence hovering over learners, it directs many of their actions.

Learning journals can arguably be said to be based on "knowing the inside of people's minds" (Foucault, 1982, p. 214) because their explicit intent is to externalize people's innermost reflections. A norm of

transformativity often hovers in the background to direct the way such journals are written, turning the keeping of journals into a confessional practice (Usher & Edwards, 1995). Adult learners who sense that their teacher is a strong advocate of experiential methods may pick up the implicit message that good journal keepers observe a norm of journal writing focused on the revelation of dramatic, private episodes in their lives that lead to transformative insights. Adults who do not have anything painful, traumatic, or exciting to confess may start to feel that their journal is not quite what the teacher ordered, that it strays too far from the transformative norm. Not being able to produce revelations of sufficient intensity, they may decide to invent some. Or, they may start to paint quite ordinary experiences with a sheen of transformative significance. A lack of dramatic experiences or insights may be perceived by students as a sign of failure—an indication that their lives are somehow incomplete and lived at a level that is insufficiently self-aware or exciting. Their lack of transformativity transgresses the hidden, but powerful, norm for journal writing.

Discussion as a way of learning that is quintessentially adult can be experienced by learners as performance theatre, a situation in which their acting is carefully watched by “the judges of normality” (Foucault 1977a, p. 304). These judges (discussion leaders) monitor the extent to which adults are participating in the conversation in a suitable manner. Foucault argues that “the universal reign of the normative ... [means that each person] subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements” (p. 304). Many adult discussion groups are certainly influenced by an unexpressed norm of what constitutes good discussion. This norm holds that such discussions are those in which everyone speaks intelligently and articulately for roughly equal amounts of time, and all conversation is focused on the topic at hand. In this norm of the “good” *discussion* there is little silence. What conversation takes place focuses only on relevant issues with a suitably sophisticated level of discourse. Talk flows scintillatingly and seamlessly from topic to topic. Everyone listens attentively and respectfully to everyone else’s contributions. People make their comments in a way that is informed, thoughtful, insightful, and unfailingly courteous. The Algonquin round table or a Bloomsbury dinner party are the exemplars the norm implies, and the one towards which learners and leaders direct their discussion performances.

Discussion leaders as judges of normality reinforce the power of this norm overtly by establishing criteria for participation that operationalize the norm’s rules of conduct. Assigning part of a grade for participation, without defining what participation means, activates the norm’s influence over

participants. Learners immediately interpret participation as doing their best to exemplify this norm. They carefully rehearse stunningly insightful contributions that will make them sound like Cornel West or Gertrude Stein. Discussion teachers also covertly reinforce this norm by their subtle deployment of non-verbal behaviors signifying approval or disapproval of participants' efforts to exemplify the norm. Through nods, frowns, eye contact (or the lack of it), sighs of frustration or pity, grunts of agreement, disbelieving intakes of breath at the obvious stupidity of a particular comment, and a wide range of other gestures, discussion leaders communicate to the group when they are close to, or moving away from, the norm. Unless discussion leaders redefine criteria for discussion participation to challenge this norm, adult learners will work assiduously to gear their behavior towards its realization.

A Final Caution Against Reinforcing the Power Within Despite Participatory Approaches

In this paper I have argued that Foucault's analysis of power has direct implications for common practices found in institutionally sponsored, formal programs of adult education. Space does not permit an analysis of informal and non-formal adult education, though his analysis is also pertinent there. Reading Foucault helps one understand how apparently liberatory practices can actually work subtly to perpetuate existing power relations. Adult educators who pride themselves on their participatory approaches can inadvertently reinforce the discriminatory practices they seek to challenge. Foucault undermines adult educators' confidence that the world can be divided into good guys (democratic adult educators who subvert dominant power through experiential, dialogic practices) and bad guys (behaviorally inclined trainers who reproduce dominant ideology and practices by forcing corporate agendas on adult learners). If the critical tradition in adult education focuses on naming and defeating the enemy (see Newman, 1994), Foucault reminds us that the enemy is sometimes ourselves.

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