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2 COMMENTS

BY CHRISTYWENGER UNCATEGORIZED

Expanded Perspectives on Power

As teachers of writing, we appreciate the work of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (<http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=175717>) for recognizing our whole, embodied selves; for attending to the importance of mindful living-learning; and for encouraging more contemplative, meaningful education. In making room for these inherent yet under-recognized elements of our lives, we find the need, too, for expanded perspectives on power. Power intersects our lives in and out of schools and is part of how we live, communicate, and relate with self and others.

In writing studies, we already talk about and around relations and assume that they are valuable in our writing and teaching lives. To illustrate, on the one hand, we tacitly talk about relations and power when we value “winning over” the audience or when we prioritize the teaching of argumentation and debate. In both cases, we invoke the language of victory, winning, and the attendant “battle, strife, and war” (Engels 180 (http://www.academia.edu/4024348/Introduction_to_the_Forum_on_the_Violence_of_Rhetoric)). On the other hand, we invoke different relations and power when writers like Paula Mathieu (<http://www.jaconlinejournal.com/archives/vol34.1.html>), Mary Rose O'Reilley (<http://www.amazon.com/Radical-Presence-Teaching-Contemplative-Practice/dp/0867094273>), and Kristina Fennelly (<https://aeplblog.wordpress.com/>) urge us to embrace mindfulness in conversation and to sit more reflexively with ourselves. In these cases, we are urged to be *with* one and another. As such, these two modes of communication imply different types of relations and different forms of power. The former is wound up with domination (*power over*), while the latter strives for solidarity or affiliation (*power with*) or even goal-directed investment or action (*power to*).

To begin, considerations of power often start with **critique of domination, or power over**. This critique gets at asymmetrical, controlling power: power that can be visually represented through the image of one person standing over another. We see *power over*, for instance, in the image of “Fighting Giants” that the organization Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (<http://www.humiliationstudies.org/intervention/concept.php>) uses to illustrate “the downward movement that is at the core of humiliation”:




(<https://aeplblog.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/untitled1.png>)

In this representation, power signals brute force, as well as the complete control and domination over another. We can't but notice how our gaze is immediately directed at the towering, triumphant figures holding the dagger and club. At the same time, our gaze is deflected from those objectified, humiliated, and confined to a suppressed pose. *Power over* can be this extreme, but we often experience it in more subtle ways. The many accounts of everyday microaggressions (<http://www.microaggressions.com/>), for instance, illustrate the cumulative and consequential impact of seemingly

To counter the objectification and related dehumanization of *power over*, we draw strength from the adage “speaking truth to power (<http://www.quaker.org/sttp.html>).” This adage implies a latent power in agentive individuals, even as it calls explicit attention to the form of established, dominant power, or *power over*. When we name other forms of power, we can cultivate the relational investment in *power with* and goal-directed investment in *power to*.

The relational stance of *power with* entails solidarity and affiliation. It involves building and sustaining affiliative relationships. This relational work can manifest as standing with and alongside others, which we see in images of demonstrations, such as this one from 1965 Selma, Alabama, and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (<https://www.google.com/url?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.denverlibrary.org%2Fblog%2F50-years-ago-civil-rights-movement&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNHDM5yeWZNfD575o9fCa9FbfufM9Q>):

 Untitled2

<https://aeplblog.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/untitled2.png>

Moreover, *power with* involves coalition and caucus building, so we might think of the mantra “power in numbers (<http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-03-16/power-numbers-more-phrase-its-vital-part-social-change>)” or of an image like this one in which we find individuals standing shoulder-to-shoulder, arm-in-arm, much larger and stronger *together* than alone.

Along with the power that emerges from this togetherness—a relational power—is **the actionable stance of *power to***, which entails action and resources. Hence, another name for *power to* is facilitative power. *Power to* facilitates and involves standing up and as part of institutions, acting from the realization that “Institutions R Us”: “we made ‘em, we can fix ‘em” (Porter et al. 611 (http://www.jstor.org/stable/358914?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)). In this way, we might think of the saying, “power to the people. (<http://powertothepeople.fm>)” The saying implicitly calls into question institutionalized power and explicitly redirects power. In doing so, people are invited to do something: creating the potential for *power to* reimagine the status quo and move toward an “ought to be. (<http://civicroflection.org/resources/library/browse/islands-of-decency>)” Again, looking to the second image, we see that institutions are not out there or separate from people, but changeable by everyday actions.

As we embrace expanded perspectives on learning, we’d like to suggest and call for expanded perspectives on power. We ask you, therefore, to consider with us:

- What illustrative moments, events, and slogans/mantras demonstrate different forms of power?
- What other forms of power do you see impacting how we write the word/world?
- How do you currently use power across/within your relations with students, colleagues, and people in your communities?
- How could you use power differently, especially toward more equitable relations?

Moving beyond the critique of *power over*, we invite all of us to make actionable our commitments through the stances of power with (<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/race/diabetal.cfm>) and power to (<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/race/diabetal.cfm>). When we see ourselves as powerful, we are better able to expand our

perspectives; then we can work with and alongside others toward transforming inequities.

– Rasha Diab (<https://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/english/faculty/rd22395>), Thomas Ferrel (<https://www.linkedin.com/pub/thomas-ferrel/70/34a/5b8>), and Beth Godbee (http://works.bepress.com/beth_godbee/)

About the Authors

The three of us — Rasha Diab (<https://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/english/faculty/rd22395>), Thomas Ferrel (<https://www.linkedin.com/pub/thomas-ferrel/70/34a/5b8>), and Beth Godbee (http://works.bepress.com/beth_godbee/) — have been collaborating since 2006, co-authoring articles now published in *Across the Disciplines* (<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/race/diabetal.cfm>) and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* (<http://www.praxisuwc.com/diab-godbee-ferrell-simpkins-101/>) and presenting together at conferences, including the *Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)* (<http://www.ncte.org/cccc>), the *International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Collaborative* (<http://writingcenters.org/>), the *Thomas R. Watson Conference* (<http://conferences.library.louisville.edu/ocs/index.php/watson/watson2014>), the *Women's Worlds Congress* (<http://www.care2.com/causes/womens-worlds-ottawa-welcomes-international-feminist-conference.html>), and the *Midwest Writing Centers Association (MWCA)* (<http://www.midwestwritingcenters.org/>). These publications and presentations lay the groundwork for our work on relational communication and expanded perspectives on power. We are currently at work on a book-length manuscript developing the concept of affiliative disposition, or reflective positioning of the self in relation to others for more equitable relations.



(<https://aeplblog.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/untitled3.png>)

Tagged [contemplative](#), [power](#), [writing](#)

2 thoughts on “Expanded Perspectives on Power”

Jill Morstad says:

June 29, 2015 at 3:01 pm

Love this, and thanks for sharing it here. In class we graph the two dimensions of power: power over is the vertical line, and power to is the horizontal line. Where they intersect lies the definition, and trickier workings-out, of agency. Yes?

Reply

Thomas with Beth and Rasha says:

June 30, 2015 at 3:00 pm

Jill, thanks for your comment and engagement with the piece! We're certainly interested in seeing this visualization. If we focus on the intersection between power over and to, we also could focus on the many points of disconnect and think about whether there is agency there too. We're wondering also if/where power-with might fit in.

Reply

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