

Negotiating Power in the Classroom

The Example of Group Work

by Linda Briskin

Cet article démontre que l'absence de stratégies interventionnistes pro-actives pour traiter de la dynamique du pouvoir dans les classes peut miner même les pratiques en apparence progressistes comme le travail des groupes collaboratifs.

Being a woman or a minority teacher in the classroom always has significance: in what we do, how we do it, how we feel about what we do, how students engage with us, and in how the institution responds to us. Gender and race neutrality is impossible.

Despite teacher desire to focus on course content, especially at the university, I would contend that power is always part of the curriculum. Acknowledging the centrality of power to the teaching-learning process not only shifts attention away from the content, but also unsettles certain notions of what constitutes progressive teaching; at the same time, it opens up possibilities for re-organizing classrooms and creates the foundation for vibrant teaching and learning experiences. This article, then, argues in favour of proactive interventionist strategies to deal with power dynamics, and demonstrates how the absence of such an approach can undermine even apparently progressive practices such as collaborative group work.

Proactive interventionist practices lead to consciousness through naming, and openly negotiate about the power dynamics in the everyday life of the classroom; this strategy takes the social, albeit shifting, meanings of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and age into account. Such an interventionist approach does not seek a resolution but rather looks for empowering rather than disadvantaging ways to deal with the dynamics of power and privilege, to harness these dynamics in the interests of learning and social change.¹

This proactive approach is in sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom about how to address sexism and racism in the classroom, the central informing vision of which counterposes sexist and racist with non-sexist and non-racist, sometimes called gender and race-neutrality. Strategies of gender and race neutrality presuppose the possibility of making gender and race irrelevant. They try to ignore or at least minimize the significance of gender and race, for example, when we assert that it doesn't matter what colour or sex a person is, or when teachers say: "a child is a child ..." to indicate their sex and colour blindness.²

I challenge this belief in the "abstract individual" of liberalism and argue that teachers never teach, for example, a generic engineering student. She is not an engineering student who just happens to be a woman; being a woman is significant to how she is an engineering student, how and what she learns, and how we teach her. This is not an essentialist view, i.e. it does not assume that there is a transhistorical and unchanging meaning to being a woman. Rather it is historically specific (Riley). So, as a result of the 1989 Montreal Massacre in which 14 women engineering students were murdered ostensibly because they were feminists, the meaning of being "a woman engineering student" has changed significantly. Similarly, being a woman or a minority teacher in the classroom always has significance: in what we do, how we do it, how we feel about what we do, how students engage with us, and in how the institution responds to us. I suggest, then, that gender and race neutrality is impossible and that neutrality strategies reproduce privilege. Strategies to increase classroom equity which do not name openly and confront directly such dynamics will not be successful and may even backfire.³

Some reported attempts to alter classroom power dynamics

The text and subtext about power is clearly exposed when research on changing classroom dynamics and student reactions to such changes is examined. Barbara Houston describes a study where attempts to eliminate gender bias against girls provoked claims of discrimination by the boys.

When a teacher tries to eliminate gender bias in participation by giving 34 per cent of her attention to girls who constitute one-half the class, the boys protested: "she always asks girls all the questions"; "she doesn't like boys and just listens to girls all the time." In a sexist society boys perceive that two-thirds of the teachers' time is a fair allotment for them, and if it is altered so they receive less, they feel they are discriminated against. And of course they resist, and they protest, and teachers often give in in order to foster the cooperation that gives the appearance that they are in control of the classroom. (141)

In a similar Swedish study, the teacher upsetting the power relations and producing this anger among the boys was so disturbing to the girls that they asked the teacher to return to her original way of teaching, despite

the fact that it had advantaged the boys (Molloy).

A teacher of a Grade 6 class in London, Ontario, recounted the following incident.⁴ She had read about teachers discriminating against girls, she was certain she did not, but wanted to be sure. She kept track of how much time and attention she gave to boys and girls and discovered that, indeed, she was giving more time to the boys. After only a week of attempting to equalize her attention, she was called into the principal's office. The parents of the boys had called indicating that their sons had been complaining that she didn't like them any more. She was quite apprehensive about an upcoming meeting with the boys'

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parents. I suggested that she insist that the parents of the girls also attend.

In these examples, teachers assume that the lack of equal attention to girls is simply a result of teacher error which can be corrected through care and diligence. Teachers focused on altering their own behaviour by equalizing attention given to the boys and girls. They did not openly take up the dimensions of power that were producing and reproducing patterns of attention within their classrooms, and did not engage students in actively interrogating their own behaviours. What they underestimated is the deeply embedded gendered relations of power. Teacher strategies to eliminate gender bias invariably invoke questions of power and make visible the boys' defence of their privilege, their sense of entitlement to more than a fair share of attention and space, and their oft refusal to acknowledge organized gender privilege which accrues to them.⁵ In a debate about peace education in Lewis' university classroom that drew connections among patriarchy, violence, and political economy (thus making gender power visible), Lewis notes that the men

showed a strong inclination to redirect discussion to notions of world violence as a *human* and not a gendered problem. By doing so, the men attempted to reappropriate a speaking space for themselves, which they saw to be threatened by my analysis. (175)

In this example, the men are trying to shift the discussion from "the margin back to the centre," in the language used by Llyn De Danaan to make sense of racial power dynamics in the classroom but which is relevant also to a discussion of gender.⁶ She points out that a class that looks "at society from margin to centre is ... disorienting for most white students" (138).

Students who have problems with losing centre place can make a transformed classroom problematic....

In a classroom where the oblique view is the norm, white students complain of ambiguity, seek "closure," and *wish to redefine the agenda*. (138-140; my emphasis)

Group work

The rest of this article explores group work as a strategic intervention which can highlight practices of power. Many teachers organize group work and collaboration in the hope of providing a more effective learning space for marginalized voices: some groups are assigned projects or presentations, others operate as break-out groups for short periods of class time. I would argue, however, that collaboration and group work are not in themselves solutions; if the organization of group work does not take account of power dynamics, group work itself can reinscribe power relations rather than create openings for more inclusive learning.

The composition of work groups is rarely seen to be significant. Many teachers are inclined to divide students randomly, implicitly informed by a non-sexist, non-racist approach which attempts to make gender and race irrelevant. Some might organize groups with equal numbers of women and men, or people of colour and whites. However, the fact that representation does not equal power has been more than demonstrated by research, for example, which examines the impact of the presence of a few men in a class of women,⁷ or the election of male leaderships in female-dominated unions. In such instances, even the numerical domination of women does not necessarily translate into power.

An interventionist approach begins by naming the problematic of power that exists in work groups and then negotiating with students about the composition of groups. The discussion itself about group practices is an important learning moment, especially if marginalized voices are able to articulate their concerns.⁸

In making an argument, then, for the possible use of same-sex or same-race work groups (and, by extension, depending on the context, same-sex or same-race classes, and perhaps schools), it is important to stress that, in the current context, this strategy is different from imposed segregation, or from separation based on essentialist difference; rather, it rests on the recognition of differences in power.⁹ In this regard it is interesting to trace the shifting discourse on co-education. Linda Eyre studies home economics which was excluded from co-education until the 1970s when "feminist concerns about women's equality and the role of schooling in the sexual division of labour" (193) led to the promotion of home economics as a coeducational subject. Her study of "balancing the ratio of female and male students" in home economics concludes that coeducation has "not fulfilled its promise as a solution to gender inequality in schools" (193). It is in this historic

trajectory that discussions of single-sex or race education must be situated. Single-sex work groups, for example, can be a strategy for revealing gendered relations of power and for empowering girls and women to resist them, on the one hand, and, on the other, a context in which their learning can be facilitated.

Research suggests that under many circumstances mixed gender work groups reproduce existing power dynamics.¹⁰ *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (the 1992 report of the American Association of University Women) provides a comprehensive review of the literature. It is worth quoting at some length.

Girls'-only groups work "as a bridge to competence and assertiveness in mixed-sex groups, and ... [provide] possibilities which allow girls' self-concepts to develop to the stage where they, alongside the boys, can take on the role of initiators."

Researchers have found that the majority of elementary students preferred single-sex work groups... [D]ifferent communication patterns of males and females can be an obstacle to effective cross-gender relationships. Females are more indirect in speech, relying often on questioning, while more direct males are more likely to make declarative statements or even to interrupt. Research indicates that boys in small groups are more likely to receive requested help from girls; girls' requests, on the other hand, are more likely to be ignored by boys ... male students may choose to show their social dominance by not readily talking with females.

Not only are the challenges to cross-gender cooperation significant, but cooperative learning as currently implemented may not be powerful enough to overcome these obstacles. Some research indicates that the infrequent use of small, unstructured work groups is not effective in reducing gender stereotypes, and in fact, increases stereotyping. Groups often provide boys with leadership opportunities that increase their self-esteem. Females are often seen as followers and are less likely to want to work in mixed-sex groups in the future. Another study indicates a decrease in female achievement when females are placed in mixed-sex groups. (72-3)

Pat Mahoney "claims that one of the most noticeable features of a mixed-sex group is the huge amount of time and energy which the boys exert in denying the girls' academic ability" (qtd. in Reay 39). In the integrated home economics classroom, Eyre found that both girls and boys tended to gravitate toward same-sex work groups. Given the behaviour of the boys, she found the girls choice more than understandable.

Classroom observations day after day showed that a group of boys not only dominated student-teacher interaction, but they also corrected, interrupted and ridiculed girls and quieter boys and woman teachers. Whereas the silence or the laughter of most girls and quieter boys had the effect of giving power to the dominant boys, those who tried to break this control were subjected to further abuse. Girls had good reasons for segregating themselves from boys. (215)

In contrast, evidence suggests that same-sex work groups are effective for girls. Diane Reay reports on the success of such an initiative in the Inner London school where she taught. She says

I had the happy experience of seeing a transformation in the girls.... *As their confidence began to grow, peer group interaction back in the mixed classroom was affected...* Tina, one of the girls, wrote in her end of term report.... "I've learnt not to put up with the boys putting me down. I tell them to shut up and get on with their work." (42)

Reay finds that girls'-only groups work

as a bridge to competence and assertiveness in mixed-sex groups, and ... [provide] possibilities which allow girls' self concepts to develop to the stage where they, alongside the boys, can take on the role of initiators. (40)

Significantly, the boys' responses to the project were not nearly so positive. "In direct contrast to the girls, many of the boys felt they had learnt nothing about themselves ..." (43). Reay concludes that "we were left with the inevitable conundrum—should we provide girls with the discrimination they need if the result is a wave of male anger and resentment from the boys?" (44). And, despite the fact that the girls' school achievements and self-confidence increased dramatically and that "boys' attempts to sabotage extra resourcing for girls has been documented elsewhere," the school did not continue the girls' project.

A project in Denmark (Kruse) that alternates children between single-sex and coeducational settings had success not only with the girls but also with the boys.

Some of the girls admitted to having missed the boys, their cheek and outspokenness ... but the girls now recognized how their classes used to be dominated by boys and realized their own part in letting them.... (92-3)

Back in the coeducational setting ... the girls openly struggled for more space and mounted fierce reactions to the boys' dominant behaviour. The boys were irritated but showed more respect for the girls than they had done earlier.... Boys who wish to

associate or chose to work with girls no longer got teased by other boys! (96)

Reay's report does not describe the work done with the boys in single-sex settings, but the Danish project stresses the importance of the single-sex settings for boys and, in particular, the critical role of the male teacher who had a proactive agenda for taking up masculine sex role patterns and expectations with the boys. Kruse also points out that, from a strategic point of view,

focusing only on girls will result in imposing on them

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the whole responsibility for change, and it will underpin the assumption that “boys are boys” and therefore cannot change. (90)

Although I am sympathetic to the need to re-educate boys, I am concerned that the power dimensions in the relationships between girls and boys may be lost in the view that both sexes equally need re-education. This kind of “humanism” can hide the power dynamics which heavily favour boys.

The success of active interventions into power dynamics through the strategy of separate work groups is in sharp contrast to the problems that arose when teachers focussed on altering their own behaviour by equalizing attention given to the boys and girls and did not engage students in actively interrogating their own behaviours. Linda Eyre's study of the integrated home economics class shows that, despite the challenge to certain sex-role stereotypes in that context, “gender as a social relation of power” continued to operate when unchallenged. She discusses two suggestive examples. As a classroom observer, she noticed that the boys talk was frequently homophobic and misogynist. Teachers were explicit about “making light of” such talk and using “diversionary tactics” (213).

Though teachers showed concern about the amount of noise the boys were making, they did not usually address the content of the boys' talk.... By suggesting that such talk should be kept private, or reserved for the locker room, and by not being explicit about the content, teachers may inadvertently have condoned the content of the boys' talk. (206)

In another example, Eyre describes instances where teachers drew attention to the silence of the girls and tried to

encourage them to speak. However, the teachers did not address the reasons for the girls' silence. Eyre concludes that “although this approach [the teacher's prompting of the girls] sometimes initiated a response from girls, it made a problem of girls' quietness rather than of boys' dominance and inability to listen” (210). I would suggest that without a proactive interventionist approach towards speaking and silence, gendered power dynamics will be reinforced.

In arguing for the strategic use of separate-sex or separate-race groups, some caution is necessary. I am not suggesting that inside of these groups power dynamics among students are eliminated. Instead, other dimensions of power—around race or ethnicity, for example, in a single-sex group—can emerge as significant. In the research undertaken by Kruse, separate boys' classes revealed much about the power dynamics among boys which had been submerged in the coeducational classroom.

Let me end with a discussion of an incident recounted to me by a male high school teacher.¹¹ While showing a video about violence against women to a Grade 10 class, sexist outbursts by some of the male students forced the teacher to stop the video. He tried to discuss the outbursts with the class but, in his assessment, the discussion was derailed by a young woman who said that she didn't see any problem with the boys' behaviour. At a distance, the history of that particular classroom is unavailable; we do not know, for example, if student bonding against the teacher was invoked. The motivations of the young woman are also opaque; we do not have access to her version of the incident or her understanding of her own agency. Yet it is possible to imagine that she rightly understands that her currency is dependent on the boys' approval (not the approval of the teacher) and so she seeks an alliance with them.

The power of the young woman to derail the discussion also merits analysis. Why would her voice carry such weight when so much evidence underscores the difficulties girls and women have accessing authority in classrooms? In this instance, her voice operates to reinscribe patriarchal norms; perhaps this is why it has the impact it does. Would it have been possible for a male student to derail the discussion in this way? Probably not.¹² How difficult, perhaps even dangerous, would it have been for a female student to challenge the boys' outbursts, even with the teacher's support? In such a situation, young women are placed in a difficult position.

However, had the teacher immediately divided the groups by sex and asked them to discuss the outbursts, the girls might have been provided the space and context to develop a collective voice with enough confidence to challenge the boys. This pro-active intervention into the classroom power dynamics might have helped to overcome their individual powerlessness.

This example suggests that work groups that take account of classroom power dynamics may also have an impact on patterns of speaking and silence; the route to

speaking for the marginalized may be collective and not individual. Speaking and silence tend to be understood as a function of individuals; but it may be that alliances among students can strengthen and secure those voices in what are fundamentally unsafe classrooms. Ellsworth calls for "affinity groups" (which occur outside of class time).

Dialogue ... is impossible in the culture at large, ... because power relations between raced, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust. The injustice of these relations, and the way in which those injunctions distort communication, cannot be overcome in a classroom, no matter how committed the teacher and students.... (108)

[A]ffinity groups were necessary for working against the way current historical configurations of oppressions were reproduced in class. They provided some participants with safer home bases.... Once we acknowledged the existence, necessity and value of these affinity groups, we began to see our task not as one of building democratic dialogue between free and equal individuals, but of building a coalition among the multiple, shifting, intersecting, and sometimes contradictory groups carrying unequal weights of legitimacy within the culture and the classroom. (109)

Conclusion

Precisely because proactive interventions into power dynamics are about power, teachers, especially those who themselves are marginal, who take power up and on, may face a lot of resistance. Naming the practices of power can be very unsettling for those who benefit from them, and even for those who do not benefit but have developed a comfortable acceptance of and familiarity with them.

It may be that for some teachers, isolated in single classrooms, it is impossible (perhaps even foolhardy) to try to unsettle such dynamics. These difficulties underscore the need for collective and institutional level intervention. Not only do teachers need to re-examine the practices of power in classrooms, but they also need to push for institutional policy that will address issues of power in the classroom and systemic patterns of discrimination, and for extensive training and retraining of teachers and faculty to better understand these issues. Such changes will provide institutional support for those groups of teachers and students who are isolated and marginalized in individual classrooms, and a foundation for changing the climate and practices of education, for what is learned, who learns it and how.

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¹It is certainly the case that strategic responses to power dynamics in the classroom must be contextually and historically located. It is not insignificant that I have done most of my teaching in inner-city high schools in Montreal, at Sheridan College in the working-class community of Brampton, and at York University, perhaps the university with the most heterogenous student population. In all instances, I taught about gender issues, often in the context of mainstream English, writing, or social science courses, sometimes in women's studies courses. I would argue that power is always operating in classrooms, but the dimensions of power with the most resonance will vary historically and contextually; further, there is clearly a range of effective strategic responses to such dynamics.

²For a more detailed analysis of the limits of "non-sexism," see Briskin.

³Sarita Srivastava draws the same conclusion about anti-racist workshops: "Although the facilitator/producer was skilled, by not explicitly addressing power relations within the workshop, she implicitly reinforced them" (108).

⁴This incident was told to me after a talk I gave at the University of Western Ontario in March 1990.

⁵One of the best examples of this defense of privilege is in the discussion of affirmative action and the claims by white men of reverse discrimination. Also the whole discourse on political correctness which has significantly undermined attempts to change the power dynamics in universities.

⁶I am ambivalent about the use of the metaphor of "centre and margin." The danger in this somewhat static dualism is that it assumes not only the notion of a centre, but also implicitly suggests what occupies, and perhaps what should occupy, the centre (white, male, heterosexual, the West). Furthermore, it implies a certain relation between margin

and centre—a privileging of the centre over the margin. We need language that problematizes the connection, interrogates the assumption of the marginality of the margin, recognizes that what is understood as centre and margin is always in process and constituted in struggle.

⁷For example, in a study by Craig and Sherif a major finding was that “men were more influential than women when there were one man and three women present ...” (463). The study concluded, “men have been found to be more influential when in a minority of one than in other conditions. There is also some indication that when men are not influential it is their choice; thus, they are still really in control of the situation.... [I]t is clear that a man is more influential in a minority, which has strong implication for men moving into traditionally female occupations and businesses. They may, in fact, be given more than an equal say compared to the women in the group” (465).

⁸In a meeting to plan some sessions on pedagogy at another university where I had been invited to speak about power in the classroom, I raised the issue about how we should break up the larger group and pointed out the difficulties of doing it randomly. The tenured faculty member on the committee thought we should do it randomly since she did not think there were any significant power issues in the group (which would be composed of women who identified as feminist, both graduate students and faculty). The graduate student on the committee hesitantly disagreed, pointing out that she thought many of her peers would feel uncomfortable speaking openly with the faculty. The faculty member was quite surprised, but the decision to organize groups by “status” created a opening for feminist graduate students to articulate a wide range of concerns.

⁹There is a growing interest in single-sex schooling for girls. The all-girls and specifically feminist Linden School has recently opened in Toronto, and *Kinesis* (May 1995) reports that a pilot project with girls’-only classes is operating at Earl Grey School in Winnipeg. There has also been debate in the Toronto Board of Education about the possibility of “black focused schools” and the Board had recently launched the Triangle Program for lesbian and gay youth at the Oasis Alternative Secondary School.

¹⁰I have seen little research on this issue done with university students, except anecdotal material which focuses on women’s studies. The lack of research on teaching practices at the university reflects the marginalization of pedagogy.

¹¹This incident was told to me at a workshop I ran (with Roxana Ng) for the Toronto Board of Education in 1993.

¹²A comparison can be made to the differential impact of women and men who speak against feminism: how much more impact anti-feminist *women’s* voices have in the current historical context.

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