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Enhancing Learning with Authoritative Actions: Reflective Practice of Positive Power

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Abstract

Drawing from classic power perspective, my reflective practice illuminates how power action, traditionally recognized as negative and detrimental to teaching process and learning outcomes, could be shaped in a positive way to enhance learning. Insights gained from this action research set in a politically charged and culturally homogenous environment provide critical perspective to the research community and challenge traditional practices of teaching and learning. Implications gained call for attention to critical perspective of empirical studies that could provide lessons for educators and researchers to create a more effective teaching and learning environment with authoritative power. An action framework is created in the end to illustrate how the positive authoritative process can be achieved.

Introduction

It is widely recognized that action research continues to strive for recognition in the research community that is largely dominated by positivist approaches (Chen and Hirschheim, 2004). The difficulty to conduct action research, particularly when it is related to critical perspectives such as empowerment and emancipation, has been commonly faced by contemporary researchers (Polistina and Nolas, 2009). Consequently, the existing body of knowledge apparently lacks an adequate understanding of the significance of critical pedagogy in today's business and educational environments that are situated in the information age connected by a vast global network (Castells, et al., 1999). The issue of lacking empirical understanding of critical pedagogy and power perspectives is that proper teaching and learning environment cannot be created for the 21st century learners who live a multicultural, networked, globalised society (Chen, 2011).

The purpose of this action research is thus to help build empirical understanding of critical perspective in contemporary education systems and provide practical insights to educators worldwide about how critical pedagogy might enhance teaching practice. Traditionally, critical pedagogy emphasized social justice and power equality among different interest (e.g. student) groups (Apple, 1999; Cherryholmes, 1991), advocated multicultural teaching practice and educational environment (May, 1999; Nieto, 1999), and argued strongly against racism and power practice in education (DeCuir and Dixon, 2004; McLaren, 1995). Most forms of power practice, which was an essential part of critical perspective, were often associated with compromising the minority group's interests (Fairhurst and Snively, 1983) and in education they were even considered as negative and detrimental to institutions (Bedeian, 2002; Chen, 2007). Consequently, most power practice was understandably discouraged in education and little about its potential effects in teaching and learning was empirically studied. This led to one dimensional understanding of power practice and critical pedagogy that was not encouraged by classic power researchers (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962).

However, the teaching and learning dynamic inevitably involves power practice because it is naturally inherited in a teacher's position and in the conflict of interests that commonly exists between teachers and students (Chen, 2007). Therefore, to better understand power dynamic in the teaching and learning process, there is a need to inquire "How can power action be positive in the teaching practice" and "How can positive effects of power action influence the learning outcomes." With its exploratory nature of investigation, the research findings could make potential contribution in the following areas: it could (1) help build theoretical and empirical understanding of critical pedagogy, (2) challenge and reshape existing perception of power practice in education, particularly its traditional, negative notion, (3) provide

empirical lessons to educators about how to enhance teaching practice in alternative ways, and (4) serve as exploratory foundation for future educators and researchers that are interested in critical pedagogy and critical theory, respectively.

Power Perspectives

While the notion of power has been widely addressed (Anton, 1963; Apple, 1999; Brass and Burkhardt, 1993; Cobb, 1984; Hillman, 1995; Hinings, et al., 1974; Saunders, 1981), this teaching study is primarily derived from Lukes's (1974) and Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) classic definitions, because their conceptualization of power captures its essence and is most helpful in the interpretation and analysis of my storied case. According to Lukes (1974), the underlying notion of power is that "A in some way affects B" (p. 26). The essence of power, however, is exercised and manifested due to a conflict of interests among actors. Without the conflict of interests, consensual authority or influence cannot be a form of power. Such authority or influence could include inducement, encouragement, persuasion, etc. Although A who exercises these actions could get B to perform in certain ways of A's preferences, only when the conflict of interests is involved will A's influence over B be significant enough to shape certain form of power (Lukes, 1974). In other words, the existence of power is primarily derived from a conflict of interests among actors.

Bachrach and Baratz (1970) further explain that "To the extent that a person or group—consciously or unconsciously—creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power" (p. 8). More specifically, power is manifested

When A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. Power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences (p. 7).

They further argue that such notion of power manifested itself in five different forms as follows (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970). *Coercion* occurs when A ensures B's compliance by threatening B for depriving B's interests. In other words, A threatens B to take away things of B's interests so that B's compliance is guaranteed. *Influence* is realized where A drives B to change his actions without implicit or explicit threat involved. In other words, A simply affects or causes B to make different decisions. *Authority* exists when B's compliance is based on his/her recognition that A's command is reasonable for B's own preference and value. In other words,

authority is sanctioned by B “either because its content is legitimate and reasonable or because it has been arrived at through a legitimate and reasonable procedure” (Lukes, 1974, p. 18). *Force* is exercised to allow A to achieve his/her objectives, when B does not comply, by depriving B’s choice between compliance and noncompliance. In other words, if B does not comply, he/she will receive penalty that helps A accomplish his/her objectives. *Manipulation* lies beneath a latent state that B may be not even aware of the existence of A’s power act upon him/her. In other words, due to either the source or the nature of A’s demand, B would potentially comply and might not even recognize it.

Due to page limit, this study will only focus on authoritative form of power action to reflect research purpose and questions. As Lukes explains, the premise for authoritative power to occur is when one party, usually considered as the powerless group, recognizes the other’s action as legitimate and reasonable. More specifically, in the teaching and learning environment, an instructor’s authoritative power can only emerge when the student group accepts power action imposed on them or vice versa. My investigation described in the Research Methodology and Action Stories sections is thus primarily based on this premise.

Research Methodology

The rationale for my choice of an action research project is largely due to sensitive subject matters, i.e. power action, involved. This purpose is highly related to action research’s original essence that advocates comparative research leading to problem solving and social actions (Lewin, 1946). More specifically, my personal experiences in the research context allow authentic and subtle issues to emerge that would not be possible by other methods otherwise (Clandinin and Connelly, 1987). Classic sociologists have suggested that our knowing of the reality exists in everyday life with or without our acknowledgment (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). We often do not know how to describe what we know but simply act on it (Schön, 1983). Such notion of know-how is similar to what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call “commonsense knowledge” in everyday life (p. 23). This type of commonsense knowledge can often be best reflected in and gained from the teaching and learning process because a teacher is also considered as “knower” who inevitably involves in the research process (Clandinin and Connelly, 1988).

Due to this dual role of researcher/knower and participant, action researchers will naturally assume a philosophical position with subjective ontology, non-positivist epistemology, and voluntary human nature (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Ontologically, the reality in the action research context cannot exist independently from the researcher’s subjective interpretation since researchers themselves also participate in the research process (Susman and Evered,

1978). No matter how neutral an action researcher (i.e. me in this project) assumes his/her research position, his/her involvement in the research process will inevitably intertwine with how the reality is perceived (Pasmore and Friedlander, 1982). As such, epistemologically, the knowledge gained from action research differs from positivism that is rooted in deductive-hypothetic reasoning (Susman and Evered, 1978). More specifically, since my investigation focuses on power issues between two distinctive groups with conflict of interests, my epistemological position is based on inductive reasoning and most related to critical theory paradigm (Chua, 1986).

Consequently, these ontological and epistemological positions lead to my human nature assumption that is based on voluntarism (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In other words, my role as a researcher/knower and teacher/participant is inevitably intertwined with the research context. It is no longer feasible for me to assume a value-free research position because my participation and intervention in the research context will inevitably interact with the teaching and learning outcomes that my action research project seeks to investigate. The complexity of such dual roles in the research process thus raises some ethics concerns between the researcher (me) and the researched (students). Whilst these concerns are fundamental issues in or limitation of action research and will be addressed in the concluding section later, my research process gains practical lessons and valuable insights by systematically analyse empirical observations and consistently reflect in practice beyond personal purpose. More specifically, my research objective is not just for personal growth or professional development but mostly for emancipatory interests in critical pedagogy (Noffke, 1997). My reflection in practice does not focus on autobiographical particularity but mostly concerns about the holistic meaning of lived experiences (i.e. collaborative reflection) in relation to issues of empowerment and social justice (i.e. communal reflection) (Rearick and Feldman, 1999). As my teaching stories will later narrate, such reflective practice could be typically observed in teaching and learning environment (Day, 2000; Goodfellow, 2000).

Reflective Process

During one academic year in the U.S.A., I taught a Java Programming course two sessions a week. I reflected on my teaching experiences at the end of each teaching day. Although autobiographic in nature, my reflections were also highly interactive with my colleagues' experiences in the professional setting and electronic communication with students and others. During that academic year, email messages were saved and later retrieved. More than five hundred received email messages helped build a more holistic understanding of my lived experience during that academic year. Email messages sent from me to students and colleagues were also archived and retrieved. All of these email messages helped me to reconstruct authentic and rich field notes about the teaching and learning process through which the

students and I lived. The power issues, which became my research focus, emerged naturally through these reflections and authentic conversations.

Action Context

The university where my action research took place was located in one of major metropolitan areas in the U.S.A. This public urban university served about 35000 students with diverse backgrounds. In contrast to student's diversity, the faculty composition was extremely homogenous. All faculty members of the department were predominantly White American males. The particular course taught, Java Programming, was an increasingly popular IS (Information Systems) course and had only been offered by the department a year before I taught it. It was designed as the 'gate keeping' course for the department. The first year when the course was offered only three instructors including a tenured faculty member that was given a pseudonym, Dr. Coke. At that time, each instructor designed individual teaching materials without much coordination because the whole group was still in a "trail and error" stage. Consequently, Dr. Coke established new rules to ensure the consistency across various sections. In this case, he demanded all instructors (current or future) to make sure that students would not pass the course easily. One particular practice that he demanded was to have a pop quiz before the start of each class and tested students with their knowledge about the chapter that we intended to cover during that session. In other words, the students were required to preview the chapter first before entering the classrooms. And Dr Coke's expectation of failing rate for those pop quizzes was around 70-80 percent. Eventually, the course gained a reputation as what students called the 'weed out' course. Many students who failed to obtain a grade of C+ could not graduate as planned. In an urban commuting school, students would naturally consider this requirement too harsh and not in their best interests. The collective interest of students and their shared aim to pass the course and desire to graduate on time was inevitably shaped. In turn, the formulation of such collective interests clearly divided the students from the faculty group.

Action Stories

Two stories were chosen to illustrate how the authoritative power was exercised by me and how students reacted to it. The first story evolved around a Hispanic male student who struggled in my class twice while the second story centered on a highly motivated White American male student. These specific stories were chosen because they represented contrasting cases, one in the struggling group and the other in the high achieving group, in a distinctive and authentic fashion that would allow a more compelling analysis. To enhance the authenticity of case stories, pseudonyms were given to all characters in the stories, particularly to these two students as Jose and Robert.

Jose's Story

I came to know Jose when he enrolled in my class the first semester. He was one of those students who would listen tentatively in the class and come to ask questions afterwards. His best friend, Marlon, was also in my section. In the beginning, Jose and Marlon expressed their strong wish to graduate together, which meant passing my course at the same time.

Unfortunately for Jose who worked in the IT industry for years with a reasonable programming skill, the decisive factor of passing or failing the course was not about real programming skill but about quizzes and examinations that were designed in a detailed, tactical format. Under the coordination of Dr. Coke, no programming exercise, assignment, or group project was given to the students. In other words, the student's grade was entirely determined by two quizzes and two examinations that were designed to assess primarily the students' test-taking rather than programming skills. The two examinations were particularly important because they accounted for 75% of final grade.

In the end of the first semester, Marlon received an A and moved onto the next level while Jose did not pass the minimum C+ requirement and had to retake the course. Jose's dream to graduate with his best friend at the same ceremony was obviously broken. His shock, disbelief, and disappointment were evident in his email message after hearing the news.

This is Jose... I just checked my grade, and my jaw dropped to the floor! I can barely breath [breathe], I cannot believe I did SO poorly! I studied untill [until] my brain almost exploded, and Marlon helped me understand sections I was having problems with. Can I meet with you to look over my exam? If this is possible, please let me know when it is most convenient for you. Thank you.

I anticipated his disappointment and quickly replied. After sending the message, I also expected that I might need to prepare more encouraging words for him. To my surprise, he quickly responded and revealed his positive attitude toward life.

You're a great instructor, and the only bright part of having to take Java over again is that I will be taking it with you again! I am a true believer that things happen for a reason, so I should accept having to retake the class and try to do better..... I feel really dumb telling people I didn't pass Java again. After I took the final exam I thought I did really well, I thought I understood the questions. I told my family friends, and coworkers I thought I passed, only because they knew how much I had been studying and worried about passing. Oh well what's done is done, I have to move on and do well next semester. Thanks again for your help and kind words of advice!

As an instructor, I found Jose's problem was largely due to his easy-going personality. Since the course was covertly designed to 'fail' students, Dr. Coke developed multiple-choice exams that heavily emphasized the syntactical and the symbolic instead of conceptual understanding of programming. Those exams were not testing a student's programming skills, which should have been the main purpose of the programming course, but a student's skill to detect detailed symbolic, numeric, or alphabetic errors. Such a skill requires rigid, precise, bird-like eyes during a highly stressful, high-stake test-taking situation.

Jose's easy-going personality would not enable him to focus on the detail and this may have caused him to overlook the many intentional errors. As such, Jose, as revealed in his email, often thought he possessed sufficient understanding but in multiple-choice exams his score was often disappointing. In addition, those multiple choice midterm and final exams only consisted of 25 items. Passing or failing them could be determined by one or two items. Moreover, the average of the exam was always so low that a substantial curve was often applied after Dr. Coke had calculated the results across all sections. Consequently, the difference between the A grade and the failing grade, C, was a raw score of 15 and 12. In the first semester, a female student, Sarah, for example, once honestly admitted her luck in the exam, "I guessed 3 items right in the exam and I went from C to A." She argued that the format of exam was based more on luck than rigor. Perhaps Jose lacked luck in his first two semesters enrolled in the class or more likely he lacked a focused demeanor to help him identify errors hidden in the exams. To pass the course, what he needed was to develop a habit that would enable him to pay attention to details, even unnecessary ones. With this experienced knowledge in mind, I was determined to invoke my power to guide Jose through his third trial, which would also constitute his last chance. Should he fail, he would no longer be allowed to major in MIS (Management Information Systems).

Before the spring break, he came by my office to ask some questions about the old exams. He then followed up with an email on the Friday before the spring break trying to make an appointment with me so that he could prepare for the upcoming exam. Since we both lived far away from the campus, we eventually decided to meet at a local family restaurant in my neighborhood. From my perspective, because Jose had requested an instructor's personal time, I expected him to be on time and to handle the matter seriously and efficiently, i.e. studying in advance and asking specific questions. Surprisingly, he was late and even forgot some basic concepts I repeated often in the classroom. After spending about three hours going over many basic concepts that he was expected to know by then, Jose must have finally come to realize that I was on the edge of losing patience and looked rather stern. Our last conversation of the meeting illustrated the beginning point of my exercise of authoritative power:

'Okay, I will discipline myself and prepare...' he tried to excuse himself.

‘I don’t want to hear that. I want to see it!’ I interrupted and “commanded” him with my authority.

‘Okay, from now no, I won’t say it but do it and show it! I promise!’

I looked at him authoritatively and thought about his easy going personality, not sure how much he would keep his words. From that point forward, I became less cheerful and more serious in interacting with him and we both knew it was because of the unstated issue, the one we never voiced—this semester, the third trial, would be his last chance. A week after meeting Jose, we had the midterm exam. Before the exam, I asked him if he was ready. With full confidence, he responded, “I cannot wait to take the exam!” I saw his attitude had improved in the classroom after our meeting. He would pay more attention to details in daily pop quizzes. I knew he studied for the exam and highly anticipated the challenge of the questions. Although his score did not achieve as high as his confidence showed, he made much improvement and maintained above the median. However, the midterm exam only accounted for 30% of the final grade; if he performed similarly in the final exam, which accounted for 45% of final grade, he would be on the borderline of failing, not just this course but the entire program and perhaps his future career. As such, my concern for him continued.

While I was concerned about his final outcome, Jose maintained his usual optimistic outlook and continued improving his detail oriented skills. Although Jose’s final outcome was not in the best group of my class, after Dr. Coke curved the final exam he obtained an adequate weighted score to pass the course, largely due to a much higher average score of my section than that of other sections. He and Marlon both came to visit me before the semester ended. As we reflected in this long programming journey, the final closure was a great relief for Jose—and for me—with the realization that he could finally move on after the third and last trial. A year later I ran into Jose in a library on campus. He revealed that he had also passed the upper level course and obtained a full time professional position in the IT industry. It marked the end of struggle for Jose in that MIS program.

Robert’s Story

On the spectrum of grade scale, if Jose was someone constantly falling on the borderline of passing/failing, Robert was one of those students that an instructor never had to worry about. He came in with high expectation of the course not just because he intended to apply for graduate schools but also because Java programming language had become a common application in the industry that he intended to fully develop his Java programming skills to enhance future employment opportunity. I first noticed him in class because he always sat in the front seat only two steps away from the podium. However, the first unforgettable impression was made when he once argued furiously with me. The incident occurred five days

before the first programming test when I asked a ‘tricky’ question on a pop quiz. I showed them a simple programming code and asked,

‘Once the program compiles, what would be the output?’

There was an intentional error in the program.

‘Are you sure it is gonna compile? Are you sure it is gonna have output?’ a student asked—that was him.

Considering the context of the course, I realized that a student who could ask such a question was rather advanced. He basically had read the chapter by himself, understood the key point of the pop quiz and detected the erroneous message. However, his question was precisely related to the answer. That caught me off guard and I could not answer him directly. Instead, I carefully emphasized again, “I cannot directly answer that question but you only need to tell me once the program complies, what would be the output?” His original question has two parts; the answer was ‘yes’ to the first part (yes, the program would compile) and ‘no’ to the second part (no, the program would not have output due to an error). This pop quiz was rather difficult because the students had to not just understand the programming notion and how to generate outputs but also to detect the errors when necessary.

The difficulty of pop quizzes was raised to such a high degree partially because I had to face constant demand and pressure from Dr. Coke. Three days earlier, Dr. Coke had told me after he was apprised that my previous pop quiz only had 40% passing rate, “Looks good but keep in mind you need fewer students to get it right later!” On the other hand, since all sections would take the same exams which were composed by Dr. Coke, the high difficulty of pop quizzes could help students prepare for Dr. Coke’s format and style of exams. Passing/failing pop quizzes would not determine a student’s grade because it was only less than 5% of final grade. However, passing/failing the exams, which accounted for 75% of final grade, would determine their final results. This rationale formed the foundation of my authoritative form of power.

As soon as I apprised my class of the answer—no output would be produced due to the error, Robert was furious and shouted at me in front of the whole class:

‘NO! I SPECIFICALLY ASKED YOU IF THIS WILL PRODUCE OUTPUT. YOU SAID, “YES!”’

“No, I said once the program complies, what would be the output?”

“BUT THE PROGRAM WON’T COMPILE!”

As his voice grew loud and his face turned red, I was very much shocked by his reaction—which was the most furious encounter I have ever experienced during the class—but I confronted him with my authority.

‘Yes, it will compile to convert source codes to Java codes, but it won’t run successfully. So it will give you an error message!’ I said with a serious look.

‘THAT IS A VERY BAD ATTITUDE TO ANSWER THE QUESTION.’

Throughout the entire period, Robert stared at me like a tiger stared at its prey only with extra anger. Although I still covered the same materials my demeanor was noticeably influenced—my usual cheerful attitude was replaced with a stern expression. Despite knowing the fact that the same instance might repeat itself, I maintained a high degree of difficulty in next pop quizzes. However, the students took the first programming test later and realized the necessity of maintaining high difficulty in every session; when they were more used to high standard of pop quizzes their results of formal exams were much improved. My rationale of “*preparing them for exams*,” thus, became a recognized authority because it indeed served their best interests in the long run. Henceforth, when the pop quiz was so difficult that only one or two students would gain the point, “*preparing them for exams*” would become my authoritative power to dismiss potential complaints. Robert’s interactions with me also became relaxed and even joyful thereafter even though sometimes he did not get the point for the pop quizzes as the following story illustrates.

On February 20, I joked before showing them the pop quiz, ‘I am always kind of nervous when you do too well because people are gonna think that maybe we cheat or maybe I give hints, or maybe the quiz is just too easy etc.’ After the pop quiz, it was Robert’s turn to joke, ‘Now, you look really good [in front of Dr. Coke]!’

I responded with a smile, ‘No, I am *preparing you for the exam*.’

As the recognition of “*preparing you for the exam*” started to build, they knew that every pop quiz indeed provided a small practice for the exam. Since then, I have only had to mention “I have to *prepare you for exams*” one more time. They worked hard to achieve a higher goal—passing the exam. Two weeks later, they took their first multiple-choice exam (i.e. midterm exam). As soon as I walked into the classroom in the next meeting, I told them the exam score was available. An interesting interaction occurred.

The whole class went dead silent until somebody asked tentatively and anxiously, ‘How was it?’

The result of my section was quite satisfying in comparison to that of other sections. But I only went, ‘eh, hmm!’ with a smile on my face.

Robert, as usual just two steps from the podium, shouted with a smile, ‘Oh that is very cynical!’

Based on Dr. Coke's rules, instructors were not allowed to explain the exam or results in public; students were then anxious to finish the session and make "a field trip" to my office. Actually, many students obtained more than 100 points after the adjustment. The exam was curved with a weight determined by all sections' results. Such a weight was only known by Dr. Coke who controlled the situation and kept the weight a secret until he released it to us. If a student's score was significantly higher than the average, he/she would very likely have a score over 100. That was the situation of many students in my class. However, with what student called 'tricky' exams, nobody felt totally confident with their results.

Xön, a student who took my class for the second time, reacted most dramatically when I showed him his score [also 100 points] on my computer screen in the office. He kept screaming, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you...' Xön's happiness and dramatic reaction was so contagious that many students who were waiting to see their results could not help but smile at him in awe. I found both pleasure and shock in his reaction and could only say, 'Okay, okay, easy, easy...'

Being one of the best students in the class, Robert, not surprisingly, also passed the first big hurdle with a perfect score. I explained to the class that there was a distinct line between those who took pop quizzes well and those who did not. The former group followed my instruction from the beginning and thus was well prepared for the exam, not just with their knowledge, but also with their mental attitude. Such a trend continued throughout the semester. Robert who was well adjusted to the format of the course eventually obtained an A. The following semester, he surprisingly requested a letter of recommendation from me for his application for graduate schools. He was eventually admitted to one of the most prestigious private schools in the U.S and began to pursue for his ambition.

Due to page limit, many other stories that were not reflected in this paper could also shed light on positive effects of authoritative power. For instance, Mandy—a female student who took my class twice—eventually obtained an A from both my class and the upper level one. When she opened the letter of recommendation that she requested from me for her scholarship applications, she calmly hugged me with tears in her eyes: "Thank you so so much! You saw my struggle in the class!" Celia, an older African American student in the first semester, even compared me to Helen Keller's teacher, Miss Sullivan, because she finally understood what Java programming was about similar to when Helen Keller comprehended the word 'water' written into her palm by Miss Sullivan. Charlene, another African American student in the first semester, invited me to her graduation party at her home one year after she took my class. I was one of the two non-Black individuals in the party—the other one was her supervisor at that time. Posie, an Indian girl, ran into me on campus two years after my teaching. Her

reaction was, “Oh, where have you been? We have been talking about you here. We missed you here!” We stood on the pavement and shared the stories of those two years. Dexter, a Hispanic student from the first semester, was about to pack and leave for a well known MBA program in California just days before we coincidentally met each other on campus. His future fitted accordingly with his plan which he revealed to me when he took my class. Xön, an Asian student, ran into me in the city’s Chinatown nearly three years after he finished my class and revealed to me that he had graduated and worked as an analyst in the finance industry.

While not every case was constructed as a single story in this paper, they collectively, particularly along with Jose’s and Robert’s stories, provided a general picture about the connection between authoritative power and teaching/learning process and outcomes. The positive effect of my authoritative power could also be reasonably supported by students’ evaluation of my teaching which resulted in 56.4/60 and 58.6/60 in the first and second semester, respectively. Those scores were higher than other instructors’ that were ranged between low 40s and low 50s. They also set the highest record in students’ evaluation of Java programming teaching at that time. In a highly technical course that was well controlled by a strict tenured professor who intended to fail the majority of students, the results of those teaching evaluation scores indicated remarkable effectiveness of my teaching method that revolved around authoritative power.

Reflective Analysis

Although both Robert and Jose represented different students backgrounds and grade levels in my programming class, their stories illustrated that positive meanings could arise from authoritative power. In Robert’s case, he initially nearly ‘resented’ the way pop quizzes were set up and perceived them as conflict of his interests. But as I repeatedly reinforced the notion of ‘preparing you for the exam’, he, along with the class, eventually came to realize my intention and recognize my authority, which in turn led to their better preparation for exams and subsequently higher test results. In Jose’s case, my stern demeanor could be demanding and my command was evidently authoritative but it provided an atmosphere for the easy-going Jose to become more focused, disciplined and cautious in handling the exams that were designed to test their test-taking skills. While there might be other factors involved, the authoritative power that I imposed on them certainly provided a platform that enabled these students to better prepare the course and in turn achieve higher results.

In reflecting the first research question, “How can power action be positive in the teaching practice,” the answers rest upon the students’ recognition of authoritative power. When the students do not perceive power action as their best interests, the instructors’ authority will not

be sanctioned. Consequently, power action will only create negative effects in the teaching and learning process. This was clearly demonstrated by Robert's first reaction toward an earlier pop quiz that he deemed tricky. Once students' recognition of the authority is established, their compliance with power action can then be guaranteed. In reflecting the second research questions, "How can positive effects of power action influence the teaching process and learning outcomes," these case stories have evidently demonstrated that once positive effects of power action are generated by the students' collective recognition of authority a more collegiate and interactive teaching atmosphere will be created, which might subsequently improve the student's overall performance. This can be largely supported by a much higher average score in my teaching section than that in others. Also, the exceptional rating of students' evaluation for my teaching might suggest that they were mostly satisfied with the authoritative method that I employed and with their own learning outcomes.

Implications

Derived from reflective analysis, it is fair to state that authoritative power could help enhance the teaching process and learning outcomes. For educators, the implication would be how such authority could be established or practiced for instructions. To further facilitate a better understanding of how authoritative power could be established, a nine-step framework is created to demonstrate the developing process of authoritative power (Figure 1). In reflection, authoritative power could only be established when its rationale is being sanctioned by the group on which the power is imposed. In other words, to establish authoritative power requires the students' realization that power action imposed on them, despite being unpleasant, demanding, or stressful, serve their best interests. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to first recognize the organizational context in which all stakeholders' issues come into play and then understand the students' needs and interests (i.e. steps 1 and 2 in Figure 1). Educators need to next develop compassion for students' needs and interests (step 3) and convey that compassion to the students clearly (step 4) in order to gain students' recognition of their authoritative rationale (step 5). Once educators' authoritative power is sanctioned, it will be easier to develop certain mechanism that iterates authoritative routines (step 6). What educators need to practice then would be to reinforce authoritative power consistently (step 7) so that students' cooperation in the teaching and learning process could be better guaranteed. To ensure reliable recognition from students, continuous assessment of students' needs and interest should be conducted throughout the teaching and learning process (step 8). Finally, educators need to be clear that the end objective of developing authoritative power is not about power action itself but about the students' learning outcomes. Eventually, they would need to evaluate how students' learning outcomes are improved (step 9) and whether revising the developing process of their authoritative power is necessary.

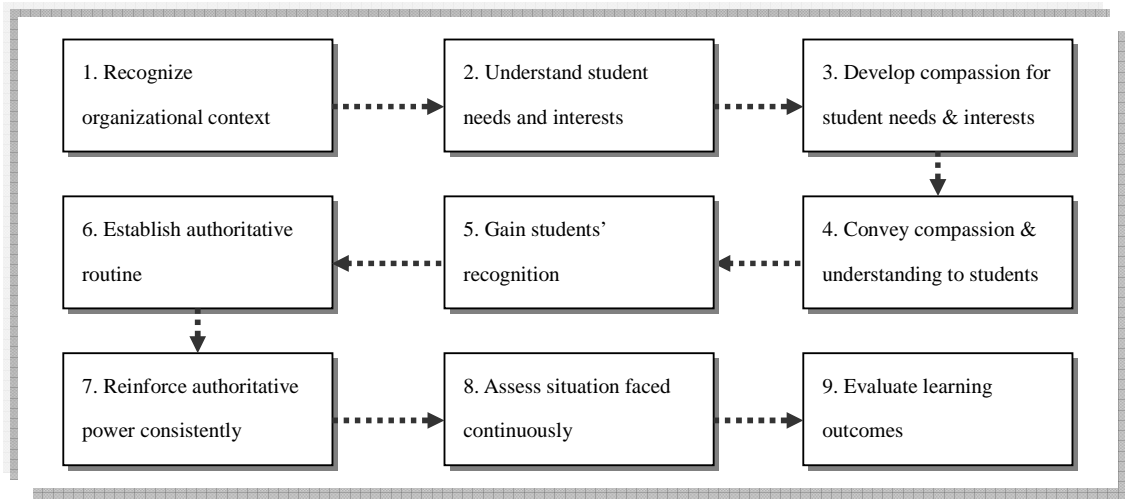


Figure 1. The Developing Process of Authoritative Power

In the case stories narrated above, the students were situated in an urban, commuting organizational context where the course that I taught was a highly technical one intending for ‘gate keeping’ purpose (step 1). The students’ collective interests were to pass the course in order to advance in the program or in their future career (step 2). My compassion for students naturally emerged in such a highly controlled environment that we both faced (step 3). Students would not have difficulty to realize my compassion when I was willing to provide personal tutoring on and off campus to help them prepare for exams (step 4). Consequently, students’ recognition of my authority was quickly established even though sometimes it could be demanding or ‘tricky’ (step 5). Once their recognition was gained, I developed certain mechanism as my authoritative routine such as “I am preparing you for exams” (step 6). The remaining process became more repetitive when I continued difficulty quizzes but reinforced the notion “I am preparing you for exams” throughout the course (step 7). When specific events occurred such as Jose’s non-promising performance after midterm exam, assessment of emerging situation was reconsidered to understand how further assistance might be of his best interests (step 8). In the end, students performed satisfactorily and their evaluation over my teaching, which centered on authoritative power, evidently provided reliable reflection of their learning outcomes (step 9).

For researchers, the framework demonstrated in Figure 1 provides a foundation to challenge traditional perception of critical pedagogy and power perspectives, which has been generally considered negative and detrimental to the teaching and learning process. As implications suggest, power action could be positive in education and it might be of educators’ best interests to identify the process through which positive power action could be undertaken and by which the teaching process and learning outcomes could be enhanced. More specifically, the intention of this framework is primarily about understanding students’ needs and interests in the beginning and achieving better learning outcomes in the end. Power action in general

or authoritative power in particular is not the end purpose but a method, tool or intermediate process to help educators to achieve the aforementioned objectives. For future researchers, empirical investigation of issues involved in any of those steps and/or their interactive relations might be of the community's interests because they could significantly help extend the existing body of knowledge on critical pedagogy and authoritative power in education.

Limitations & Concluding Remarks

Since the study relies on personal experience method, insights gained from reflective analysis and implications are inevitably subjective and thus limited to organizational context in which similar issues are faced. As in any qualitative research, the generalization could not be achieved and the intention is merely to provide insights that are expectantly valuable and practical to educators and researchers facing similar situations. In addition, due to page limit, there are only two stories analyzed. The research context is also situated in an environment where a homogeneous faculty is formed and strict rules and policies are applied to the particular course taught. All these factors constitute a unique research context that careful attention needs to be paid if greater implications or conclusion is to be drawn.

Nevertheless, this empirical study has accomplished what it sets out to do and makes expected contribution to the existing practical and research knowledge. First, it builds on theoretical foundation of power perspectives and connects to critical pedagogy that is largely overlooked in our community. It also challenges the existing perception of power action in education that is widely considered negative and detrimental to the teaching and learning process. A specific framework is further developed to help educators and researchers understand how to achieve authoritative power that could enhance teaching and learning. The empirical insights that revolve around authoritative power subsequently provide a platform connecting our community to critical pedagogy and critical theoretical paradigm. These contributions have served the research purpose stated from the outset.

In retrospect, power action is a fascinating educational issue that is faced by all educators because it is naturally inherited in our positions. This situation also provides an interesting research platform for critical pedagogy that certainly requires more attention in the research community. However, when practiced inappropriately, power action could be rather negative and detrimental to organizations and thus should be mostly avoided. When considered necessary, power action needs to be based on understanding of and compassion for students' needs and interests first. These are essential elements to gain students' recognition of power authority which could eventually lead to higher learning outcomes. In the end, as academics, we need to be clear that whether we desire a large proportion of our job content is teaching

and in teaching we are primarily facing the next generation's mind and soul. Without understanding of and compassion for students' minds and souls, we might not just fail in power practice but also fail ourselves in the educational system that fundamentally defines our profession and existence.

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