# Teaching for Empowerment

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## Abstract

*As educators in leisure and recreation studies, we should and can empower students through our teaching. The purpose of this article is to explore ideas and methods that we, as educators, might use to facilitate empowerment of students within the classroom. Specifically, this article discusses assumptions of power and privilege that underlie empowerment. Examples of how educators can disempower are also provided. In addition, biological, psychological, and sociocultural processes of empowerment as related to race, gender, and disability are examined.*

## Biographical Information

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How can we empower students through our teaching? Empowerment in the classroom is an important topic to think about as issues of access to, relevancy and effectiveness of, and retention in higher education are in the foreground of social and political debates today. The premise of this article is that we, as educators in leisure and recreation studies, should and can empower students through our teaching. The purpose of this article is to (a) define empowerment and disempowerment, (b) discuss the process of empowerment, and (c) explore what we as educators might do to empower students through our teaching.

In exploring teaching for empowerment, the meaning of empowerment must be addressed. We also contrast empowering teaching practices with those that are disempowering in order to understand how we can teach for empowerment. While it is unlikely that any of us intentionally engage in practices to disempower our students, intention does not change the reality or outcome of such practices. For the purposes of this article, discussion of empowerment and disempowerment are based on literature that focuses specifically on how and why gender, race, and physical and learning ability construct the teaching/learning process. Although these factors are not the only factors

defining the struggle for empowerment, discussion will be limited to gender, race, and physical and learning ability.

Several assumptions must be made explicit before discussing ways of empowering students. First, power and privilege define our social structure and relationships among individuals. Second, power and privilege are inequitably distributed in our society and this inequity is not only hypocritical given the rhetoric of democracy but ultimately destructive to individuals and their social and natural environments. Third, those individuals with power are frequently least aware of - or least willing to acknowledge - its existence while those individuals with less power are often most aware of its existence (Delpit, 1988). Fourth, relationships and issues of power are enacted in classrooms (Delpit, 1988). Fifth, educational practices and practitioners of education can either reproduce the social order based on existing relationships of power and privilege, or transform the social order. Finally, education, as currently practiced, does not lead to equal opportunity and does not "level the playing field" but serves to maintain existing relationships of power and privilege because many of our educational practices are disempowering.

## What is Empowerment?

Empowerment in education is often discussed in terms of the individual having a voice; that is, the culture of the individual, including knowledge and ways of knowing, is central to the educational process (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarube, 1989; Kanpol & McLaren, in press; Lather, 1991). From this perspective, if one is empowered, one has authority and is able to actively, fully engage in the many discourses of life. Education is empowering when it enables the individual to shape or define her or his life. The idea is that the empowered individual exerts control or influence over self and the social and physical environment .

Emancipation is inherent to the notion of empowerment. That is, empowerment leads to or allows individual freedom. Yet some scholars maintain that this concept of empowerment is actually a biased notion of empowerment rooted in the humanistic philosophy that dominates higher education. An ethos of individualism underlies humanistic philosophy. The individual is seen as a self-sufficient entity not in need of anything or anyone other than itself. The emphasis is on individual growth and change. The individual is seen as the controller, definer, and selector of personal empowerment. Also emphasized is behavior change as the domain solely of the individual. Hence, this philosophy or perspective reflects a political agenda that is an exclusive political text (Kanpol & McClaren, in press).

The language of liberal education today is an example of a renewed focus toward individuality. Words and concepts such as independent thought and judgment, autonomous thinking, and self-directed learning are pervasive in higher education. There are problems, however, with this philosophical/political base. Specifically, unless liberal education acknowledges certain premises of power and privilege, it will only maintain the status quo. The liberal education perspective must embrace the relationships of power and privilege and recognize the extent to which the biological and psychological individual is a social individual, both shaped by and a shaper of her or his historical and sociocultural context. Additionally, the notion of community empowerment and social

change and action must be incorporated into the liberal perspective. Without these acknowledgements and revelations, the philosophy of liberal education will only reproduce social and individual inequalities.

Poplin (1992) maintained that for social and educational change to truly take place, what we know (the past) must be reconstructed. She used excerpts from James Baldwin's "A talk to teachers" (1988) to illustrate:

> If, for example, one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only Negroes, you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history. And the reason is that if you are compelled to lie about one aspect of anybody's history, you must lie about it all. (pp. 8-9)

## What is Disempowerment?

To understand how to teach for empowerment, we must also consider the opposite practice of disempowerment that goes on in teaching both inside and outside the classroom. Given the existing social order, recreation and leisure educators must be aware that some individuals or groups of individuals are more likely to be disempowered because our teaching practices systematically favor some people and disadvantage others. For example, behaviors such as encouraging African-American and Euro-American or female and male students toward different fields of study because of their race or gender are disempowering.

Delpit's (1988) ethnographic study of African American and Native American students' experiences of education revealed a tremendous chasm between their experiences and perceptions of higher education and those of their Euro-American professors and peers. A quote by an African American woman in Delpit's study illustrates this point:

> When you're talking to White people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they're so headstrong, they think they know what's best for *everybody*, for *everybody's* children. They won't listen. White folks are going to do what they want to do *anyway*. It's really hard. They just don't listen well. No, they listen, but they don't *hear* - you know how your mama used to say you listen to the radio, but you *hear* your mother? Well, they don't *hear* me. (p. 280)

Delpit called this behavior "the silenced dialogue" and her research revealed that it permeates education.

Race is not the only factor that influences which voices are acknowledged or heard and which are silenced or not heard. Girls' and womens' realities and experiences of the world are also omitted in the classroom. Privileging some forms of knowing and knowledge over others (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Clinchy, 1990; hooks, 1989), supplying remedial reading classes for boys but not remedial math classes for girls, not talking about the structural inequities that exist in society and ways to negotiate these inequities

(Burbules & Rice, 1991; Delpit, 1988; hooks, 1989), using exclusive language in the classroom, ignoring the raised hands and responses of female students (Lather, 1991; Weiler, 1988) are all disempowering practices based on sex that occur frequently in education.

Similarly, students with disabilities sometimes experience discrimination in the classroom. Perhaps the greatest inequities come to students whose disabilities are not readily noticeable. Hidden disabilities such as learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, and dyslexia are often overlooked by some faculty. Educators may attribute disability related behaviors such as distractibility and disruptiveness to laziness or poor self discipline (c.f., AHEAD, n.d.), in turn risking stereotyping and disempowering these students.

### Process of Empowerment

The process of empowerment is a dialectic that occurs in interaction with self and others. This interaction may be conflictual. Areas of interaction and possible tensions exist around several issues: acknowledged knowledge, gaining knowledge, and communicating knowledge.

### *Acknowledged Knowledge*
As suggested in the previous section, one is empowered when one is heard in a way that acknowledges, seeks, and integrates one's knowledge into the learning situation. As teachers, we typically talk from our identities and experiences. Because we are in the position of power in the classroom, it is all too easy to be unaware that some students may not share our identities and experiences. This lack of shared experience is particularly true if the students are a numerical minority in the class and/or do not speak up. When we present our knowledge and ways of knowing as fact, we privilege or empower ourselves and those students like us. At the same time, we disempower those learners with other knowledges and ways of knowing unless we acknowledge the construction of knowledge and the voices of others unlike us (hooks, 1989; Lather, 1991; Weiler, 1988).

### *Gaining Knowledge*
Knowledge is power because it gives the individual influence over self and the physical and social environment. The process of gaining knowledge requires learning which is influenced by many factors: (a) biological, (b) psychological, and (c) sociocultural.

*Biological.* Hamilton (1983) suggested that attentional capacity, or the ability to concentrate and regulate the flow of information into the brain, is a developmental issue that is related to cortical maturation. Attentional capacity has a direct bearing on learning ability. For example, people with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to difficulties in gathering and interpreting information, especially within a formal and structured setting such as a classroom. Failure and frustration are imminent unless adapted or alternative means of learning and testing are available.

*Psychological.* In terms of psychological factors, intellectual functioning also has an effect on learning. Research on college students suggests that students may be operating from one of three intellectual perspectives. In the first two years of college students commonly believe that there is one right answer or truth. In this stage of intellectual functioning students want to know what *the* answer is and they have difficulty

dealing with multiple realities or truths. This stage is known as dualistic or received knowledge. In the next stage, known as multiplicity or subjectivism, students perceive truth as what "feels" right. They are unable to distinguish biases, strengths, and weaknesses of various perspectives at this stage. Relativism, subordinate, or procedural knowledge is the third stage of intellectual functioning identified among college students. At this stage students have an awareness of and ability to process multiple truths or realities and recognize that all are not equally valid (Perry, 1970).

*Sociocultural.* Biological and psychological abilities of an individual cannot be separated from factors such as race, gender, able-bodiedness, and social class characteristics. These attributes have social meanings and shape individuals' lives in terms of culture, opportunities, resources, and orientations toward knowledge and learning. For example, Belenky, et al. (1989) as well as Baxter-Magolda (1992) found that sex distinguishes intellectual functioning in college students. Female college students display what Belenky et al. called "connected knowing" while male college students demonstrated "separate knowing." According to Belenky et al., the connected knower does not try to evaluate the perspective she is examining but tries to understand it. For example, the female student will look at the story and be interested in the context and relationships behind the idea while the separate knower evaluates or judges the perspective without regard for context. Belenky et al. maintain that while connected knowing is gender related it is not gender exclusive. According to Poplin (1992), separate knowing characterizes the currently popular concept of critical thinking that suggests "the one who doubts best, knows the most" (p. 72). Poplin contended that this idea is problematic because doubting without understanding limits creation, transformation, and action.

Society is notorious for classifying someone who is "different" as inferior. For individuals with disabilities, perceptions and attitudes of other people can be the most disempowering factor they face. Many studies exist that discuss how attitudes of others have a negative effect on the self esteem and interaction patterns of individuals with disabilities. For example, Fichten and Amsel (1988) conducted two studies that focused on attitudes about interaction between college students with and without disabilities. The results indicated that non-disabled students had comparatively more negative thoughts toward interacting with students with disabilities than did students with disabilities toward them. For students with disabilities, anticipation of these negative attitudes within the classroom can pose barriers to learning.

## Communicating Knowledge

A third tension in the dialectic of empowerment is the ability to communicate one's knowledge with others. Research has documented that diverse styles or modes of communication are responded to differently in the classroom. For example, to "speak up" or disagree with other students in class is likely to be more difficult for women than men. From very early in life, females are encouraged to be aware of the effect of their behavior and actions on other people. That is, femininity is defined by accommodation and care for the well-being of other people. Hence, to disagree publicly with peers or teachers in the classroom requires the strength to defy cultural notions of gender (Tannen, 1991).

Race and social class also influence communication styles. According to Delpit (1988), a "culture of power" operates within and outside schools. Codes or rules for participation in the culture of power include linguistic forms, communicative strategies,

and presentation of self. In other words, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting influence inclusion in the culture of power. However, different styles of communication, in particular with "authorities" (i.e., parents, teachers), are learned by working class and middle class, African-American and Euro-American children. While adults from the working class as well as African-American parents use more directives, middle class and Euro-American parents use more rhetorical questions, and in doing so "veil their power." Further, Delpit maintained that African-Americans from the working class often view issues of power and authority differently than people from middle-class backgrounds. Delpit's research indicates that many people of color expect authority to be earned by personal efforts and exhibited by personal characteristics. In other words, "the authoritative person gets to be a teacher because she is authoritative." Members of middle-class cultures, by contrast, tend to expect one to achieve authority by the acquisition of an authoritative role; that is, "the teacher is the authority because she is the teacher" (p. 290). This perceptual difference has direct implications for attitudes and interactions between teachers and students from different races and social classes in the classroom.

Fleming's (1984) research on college students also reveals that higher education in the United States is inherently racist. She contended that this racism is a result of superiority and inferiority being concepts central to western thought. Fleming's research suggested overt racism is not the most dangerous form of racism to African-American students but rather the subtle, unseen, subverted acts of racism are most destructive. In her study, she found that African-American students are "under pressure" to see situations as dangerous, threatening. She identified four differential pressures African-American students face — limited faculty contact and mentoring, segregation of student leadership roles, higher levels and a greater range of stress, and no replacement for lack of motivation for academic competence.

First, Fleming found that African-American students had lower career aspirations than Euro-American students. They also reported having less contact with faculty and fewer mentors. Further, if African-American students had contact with faculty they were pushed towards less prestigious careers. Such interactions are of concern to Fleming because aspirations precede performance.

Second, Fleming reported that African-American and Euro-American students were similar in the advantages reaped from leadership positions. However, leadership roles were segregated by race. This segregation is of concern to Fleming because networks, influence, and self-esteem are established through such interaction.

Third, Fleming found that African-American students perceived much more and a greater range of stress than Euro-American students in the academic setting. While Euro-American students reported that they believed they learned to handle stress by their senior year, African-American students did not share this belief. For example, African-American students felt stress regarding academic performance and racial hostility. Such stress is of concern to Fleming because it can lead to stress-related disease.

Finally, results of Fleming's study indicated that while academic competence was replaced with pleasure in learning among Euro-American students by their senior

year, African-American senior students had no replacement for lack of motivation for academic competence. This lack of motivation for academic competence is of concern to Fleming because competence is the most basic motivation of humans. It results in a sense of mastery, self-esteem and continued motivation.

Fleming's (1984) research clearly indicated that the university provides different learning environments and experiences for African-American and Euro-American students. Her research also indicated that faculty are central to these differential experiences. Furthermore, the different pressures reported by African-American and Euro-American students in Fleming's research reflect issues of empowerment and suggest strategies for empowering disempowered students.

Students with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities, experience similar issues and problems with regard to communication and interaction. Because of process time required for interaction within and outside of the classroom, conversation can be difficult for someone with processing barriers. Common characteristics of specific learning disabilities can include misunderstanding what someone is saying, trouble with variant word meanings and figurative language, problems sequencing sounds, and word retrieval problems (McKernan, 1982).

Additionally, some students with learning disabilities demonstrate problems in social skills due to inconsistent perceptual abilities. For example, someone with auditory perception problems might not be able to distinguish differences between a sincere and a sarcastic statement or a subtle change in tone of voice. According to the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), these problems can and do lead to lower self esteem among these students. Therefore, alternative methods for expressing and receiving information in the classroom must be identified and provided to students with learning disabilities.

## Facilitating Empowerment

If the experiences described above reflect issues of empowerment, what can we as teachers do? Delpit (1988) contended that the rules and expectations of the classroom learning situation need to be made explicit. Teachers should not assume that all students enter higher education with an understanding of the culture of higher education. Colleges and universities are part of the culture of power; hence, teachers must acknowledge their power and the power they represent. The first thing for educators to consider is the importance of teaching the rules of the culture of power. To accomplish this task, educators must be direct. Teachers tend to be direct when expressing power and indirect when de-emphasizing power. For example, teachers de-emphasize their power when they say, "It might be best to do it this way," while power is emphasized when they state, "You must do it this way." According to Delpit (1988), because of cultural differences, Euro-American teachers tend not to be as direct when working with students as African-American teachers (see also Spindler, 1982, for a discussion of racial differences in communication styles/patterns). Delpit states, "The biggest difference between Black folks and White folks is that Black folks know when they're lying" (p. 285). In other words, educators should not lie about their power, the culture of power, and the knowledge and skills needed to gain access to that culture. At the same time, teachers cannot ignore or devalue the knowledge and skills students have acquired to survive and flourish

in cultures marginalized by the culture of power. Rather, teachers should build on students' realities and knowledges.

As previously discussed, females, students of color, and people with disabilities are typically the students who have been most disempowered through our classrooms and teaching. Once we as educators recognize and acknowledge how we disempower, we can then begin to learn about and implement the many methods of empowering students that exist. Following are some suggestions for facilitating empowerment of students from diverse backgrounds.

*Female Students*
Participating in class discussion is one method of empowerment. Sandler and Hoffman (1992) offered several strategies to encourage women to talk in class. Their suggestions include the following: (a) call on women and refer to contributions by the individual woman's name; (b) call on women directly even if they do not raise their hands; (c) make a conscious effort to call on women and men in the same proportions as is their ratio in class; (d) after asking a question, wait about five seconds before calling on someone to answer since women traditionally take longer to formulate their answers; (e) coach students with comments such as "Tell me more"; (f) watch for non-verbal cues such as leaning forward that suggest a student is interested in responding; and (g) avoid generic "he" terms in class discussions and lectures.

*Students of Color*
Given the research of Delpit (1988) and Fleming (1984), the following suggestions can be made for empowering students of color: (a) become aware of your prejudices regarding various racial groups and the assumptions you make when advising/ mentoring students from different races; (b) discuss issues of racism in your class; recreational contexts on campus are often the site of overt racism and can be brought into the classroom; (c) do not expect any one individual in your class to be the spokesperson for his or her race because diversity exists within as well as between races; (d) do not assume racial differences in learning styles or motivations; differences in learning styles are highly individualized and social class is believed to be a strong mediating factor; (e) be explicit about your expectations and standards and why you have them; if you connect your expectations to the culture of power, their importance is clarified for students of all races; (f) rather than focusing solely on how people of color are oppressed, ask Euro-American or dominant race students to talk about how they are privileged by their race; and (g) discuss issues of structural as well as individual/personal racism. Acknowledging race and racism is empowering because until something is named and recognized, it cannot be addressed.

*Students with Disabilities*
The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) identified techniques to aid faculty in empowering and facilitating learning of students with learning disabilities in the classroom. This group suggested that faculty should: (a) break material into small parcels; (b) seat students with attention deficit disorder close to the instructor; (c) start each lecture with an outline of material to be covered that period and briefly summarize key points at the conclusion of the class; (d) present new or technical vocabulary on the board or in a handout as well as verbally; (e) encourage and facilitate the use of tape recorders for note taking; (f) provide study questions; (g) encourage active

participation rather than passive absorption; and (h) allow and encourage alternative testing such as using a computer for essays, speaking the answers into a recorder, or having a reader present the test questions verbally (cf., Freeman, 1987).

### Global Considerations

More global methods exist that can help educators in leisure and recreation studies be less exclusionary in their approaches in the classroom. For example, use examples in tests, case studies, slides, films, and other teaching methods that represent the diversity within cultures in our society. In addition to being conscious of how we phrase and portray examples in class, we can invite students from diverse campus organizations such as the women's center, the lesbian/gay alliance, center for students with disabilities, or the African-American student association to discuss the issues and realities of their lives. Inequities in time, money, skills, and opportunities for leisure in our society should be a topic of discussion in an introductory course on leisure. Examples may be provided by these representatives of student organizations who can talk about their experiences of campus life and leisure or their leisure in their home communities.

Research demonstrates that under the right circumstances, personal contact can be a powerful method of altering negative attitudes toward people who are seen as different by the dominant group (cf., Beh-Pajooh, 1991; Yuker, 1988). Students in recreation and leisure studies typically pursue people- or service-oriented and "helping" occupations. Hence, opportunities to examine cultural and personal beliefs about marginalized groups of people in our society are essential for our students so that they are prepared to make a positive contribution to our field and society.

Another global method of facilitating empowerment is to educate oneself as well as one's colleagues and students about exclusion, racism, sexism, power, and being different. Educators in leisure and recreation studies should be willing to raise and address awareness of prejudices and biases. Not only scholarly writings, but poetry, films, novels, art, and biographies are means of experiencing and learning about power and privilege for yourself as well as for others.

Furthermore, allow yourself to be uncomfortable, to be challenged, and to not be the expert in terms of the content or process of teaching. Personal growth and learning often occur through open interaction with others. Ask students for feedback. Invite a colleague to react to your syllabus and to observe you while teaching in the classroom. Be a reflective teacher so that all may learn and be empowered by your teaching.

## Conclusions

As noted by Aguilar and Washington (1990), faculty are ultimately responsible for addressing issues of diversity in the curriculum. Faculty are also ultimately responsible for ensuring that learning in institutions of higher education is an empowering experience. Educating ourselves, our students, and in turn our community through knowledge and experience is the first step in meeting these responsibilities. Self-determination is central to both leisure and empowerment. Hence, facilitating self-determination must be central in all of our teaching.

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