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Uncovering Assumptions of Power

Critical reflection is all about hunting the assumptions that frame our judgments and actions as teachers. This chapter provides examples of some general pedagogic assumptions about how best to support learning and then narrows the focus to assumptions concerning the power dynamics of classrooms.

Commonsense Assumptions about Good Teaching

Common sense is another term for dominant ideology. I don't mean that common sense is always wrong, the result of ideological manipulation. But commonsense understandings are usually shaped by cultural context to reflect the general wisdom of the day. So, for some people, it's common sense that poverty is the result of a lack of individual initiative, that we live in a world in which free speech can be exercised without negative consequences, and that racism is over. As Gramsci (1971) argued we need to turn common sense into good sense. Unexamined common sense, even the evidence of our own eyes, is a notoriously unreliable guide to action. The most reliable and valid assumptions are crafted from experience that's been critically examined.

Pedagogically this means we have to investigate where our commonsense assumptions come from. Many are in the air of the professional culture we've grown up in, accepted uncritically because colleagues, textbooks, and experts have told us this is how teaching

works. When facing a new teaching situation most of us start by asking our elders and betters what to do, but this advice should always be examined as we put ourselves into practice.

Consider the following examples of how commonsense assumptions inform pedagogic action. All these assumptions and their resultant actions are probably familiar to readers, particularly those who see themselves as student-centered, progressive educators. After each example of a commonsense assumption I give a plausible alternative interpretation that calls its validity into question.

Commonsense Assumption—Visiting Small Groups

After you've set small groups a task it's common sense to visit them because this demonstrates your commitment to helping them learn. Visiting groups is an example of respectful, attentive, student-centered teaching that keeps groups on task. It shows students you're committed to their learning and take your role seriously.

Alternative Interpretation

Students experience the teacher visiting their group as a form of surveillance. The closer the teacher gets to a particular group, the more the students in that group start to perform as "good," purposeful, task-oriented students. They disdain silence, dreading that if the teacher stumbles on a group that's not talking he or she will assume the students are sloughing off, confused, or mentally inert. The pauses, thinking time, and hesitations necessary to thoughtful analysis are abolished and eager talk becomes the order of the day. Visiting student groups is also perceived as checking up to see whether students are doing what they were told to do. This comes across as insulting to students, implying that you don't trust them enough to follow directions.

Commonsense Assumption—Stop Lecturing

It's common sense to cut lecturing down to a minimum because lecturing induces passivity in students and kills critical thinking.

Alternative Interpretation

A critically enlivening lecture can, as Freire (Shor and Freire, 1987) acknowledged, be a wonderfully stimulating experience. It can open up exciting new intellectual territory, clarify complex concepts, and challenge students to rethink familiar assumptions. When lecturers question their own assumptions and consider alternate viewpoints they model critical thinking for their students and set a tone for learning. Lecturing is also a very effective way of providing the foundational grounding in an unfamiliar subject area or skill set that students need before they can start to think critically about it.

Commonsense Assumption—Students Learn Best through Discussion

It's common sense that students learn best through group discussion because they feel that their personhood and experiences are respected. Discussions increase students' engagement with a topic and foster active learning.

Alternative Interpretation

Discussions are alienating for students who feel they look or sound different. Racial and cultural minorities, working-class students, those for whom English is not a first language, introverts, and those who need time to think through ideas before speaking all see group discussion as an ordeal in which they need to perform appropriately to earn a good grade. Students aren't prepared well for discussion in high school, and the only models of discussion in the wider political culture they know provide little time for pause, silence, or careful listening.

College discussion groups reflect power dynamics and communicative inequities in the larger society and provide a showcase for egomaniacal grandstanding. Very often they're seen as pointless, held only because the teacher feels "now we should have some group talk." They're also often experienced as counterfeit. It looks as though everyone has an equal chance to speak and all voices are

welcomed, but students know that some views are definitely off the table as far as the teacher is concerned. They're often insidious and manipulative, apparently free and open but really being skillfully managed to end at a predetermined conclusion.

Commonsense Assumption—Teaching Is Mysterious

It's common sense that teaching is essentially mysterious. If we try to dissect its chemistry or understand its essence, we kill its necessary unpredictability. Attempts to break it down to its component elements or best practices stultify the joyful creativity of teaching.

Alternative Interpretation

Viewing teaching as a process of unfathomable mystery removes the necessity to think deeply about what we do and how best to introduce students to complex new knowledge or skill sets. Any serious inquiry into practice appears reductionist and asinine. The teaching as mystery metaphor can thus be a convenient shield for incompetence. It excuses teachers from having to answer such basic questions as, how do you know when you are teaching well? How do you know what and when your students are learning? How could your practice be made more responsive? Seeing teaching as mysterious works against the improvement of practice. If good or bad teaching is seen as a matter of chance then there's no point trying to do better. The teaching as mystery metaphor also closes down the chance of teachers sharing knowledge, insights, and informal theories of practice because mystery is, by definition, incommunicable.

Commonsense Assumption—Longevity Brings Wisdom

It's common sense that teachers who have been working the longest have the best instincts about what students want and what approaches work best. If my own instincts as a novice conflict with what experienced teachers tell me, I should put my instincts aside and defer to the wisdom of long-standing teachers' experiences.

Alternative Interpretation

Length of experience doesn't automatically confer deepened insight and wisdom. Ten years of practice can be one year's worth of distorted and poorly interpreted experience repeated ten times. The "experienced" teacher may be caught within self-fulfilling interpretive frameworks that remain closed to any alternative interpretations. I have known colleagues who keep explaining away poor evaluations of their teaching by students as "one-offs" or the result of students not yet being able to see the "big picture." Alternatively, as each new set of poor student evaluations comes in, it only serves to confirm the teacher's belief that a programmatic glitch is to blame. So experience that's not subject to critical analysis is an unreliable and sometimes dangerous basis for giving advice. "Experienced" teachers can collude in promoting a form of groupthink about teaching that distances them from students' reactions and bolsters their own sense of superiority.

These assumptions are, in certain situations, entirely valid. At different times and in different situations I've fervently believed in all of them and acted in ways informed by them. Their apparent clarity and truth explain why they're so widely accepted. And, in certain contexts each of them is indeed totally accurate. For example, declarations that I'll learn from my students are much more accurate if (1) the students are well beyond the novice level and have a good grounding in the topic and (2) they've already worked with me and trust my basic competence. But depending on the situation, there are also quite plausible alternative interpretations that can be made of each of them.

Most assumptions teachers act on are not wholly right or wrong. Their accuracy and validity alter depending on circumstances. So visiting groups is indeed helpful if I've explained why I'm doing it and students know me well enough to realize it's not an act of surveillance. Similarly, lecturing doesn't work as an enlivening model

of critical dialogue if students are so well versed with the material that they're already talking this way with each other. Likewise, students tend to like discussions that specify nonverbal measures of participation and introduce protocols that secure widespread participation.

Central to all reflection is the attempt to see things differently. In this section I've tried to show how assumptions and taken-for-granted understandings can be challenged by very different readings of experience. Reflective teachers probe beneath the veneer of common sense to investigate overlooked dimensions to their practice. One of the most interesting of these is power.

Assumptions of Power

Power is omnipresent in classrooms and a focus on understanding its dynamics is one of the things that make reflection critical. Informed by the critical theory tradition, "critical" reflection is interested in how power manifests itself in the classroom, how it moves around an educational setting, when its exercise opens up new possibilities, and when it closes them down. Such reflection also seeks to understand what constitutes an ethical and justifiable use of teacher power.

Part of a critically reflective focus is on clarifying how power relations in the outside world reproduce themselves in the classroom unless there's a deliberate attempt to stop this happening. As already mentioned, students most used to having their voice heard outside classrooms dominate discussion inside them. Ideas broadly accepted as true in society at large automatically induce resistance to any critiques of them. Classroom norms of how to please teachers, how furniture should be arranged for optimal learning, or what productive small-group work looks like are all learned in K–12 schooling. How students communicate across racial, gender, and cultural differences and how they cluster in affinity groups based on those differences are structured by life experiences outside.

Teacher and student identities outside the classroom also complicate life within it. In predominantly white institutions white teachers are given more credibility than teachers of color. As an older white male I can admit to mistakes with little fear of consequences. Indeed, my owning up to errors is usually read as a sign of endearing vulnerability: "how courageous of you to share your foibles and mistakes with us!" Colleagues of color and female colleagues are much more likely to have their missteps interpreted as affirmative action giving jobs to incompetent and unqualified minorities.

As a white teacher I also expect to be viewed with hostility and mistrust by mostly African American groups. I don't take this personally. In a white supremacist world it would be strange if this weren't the case. Given the actions of the white power structure a new white teacher like me will probably be regarded suspiciously. This is nothing to do with me, Stephen Brookfield. It's to do with what my skin color and phenotype represent to people of color. Earning any sort of trust or respect will only happen over time and maybe not then. Just as white students will likely view instructors of color as anomalies or the result of faulty affirmative action policies, so students of color will likely regard white instructors as inherently racist.

Focusing reflection on power also raises the whole dimension of teacher power. How does the institution authorize positional power? When do students think teachers exercise their power in helpful and ethical ways? When do they judge teachers to be acting in arbitrary and unjustifiable ways? What happens when teachers attempt to "give away" their power and work in a student-centered fashion? What does it look like to "empower" students, and is that even possible?

A particular interest of mine is understanding the complicated dynamics involved in trying to democratize the classroom. What does a truly inclusive classroom look like—one in which everybody has an equal chance to participate? How can you democratize

something when you have all the positional authority? After all, the institution requires you to judge the quality of student work and award the final grade, something students are always well aware of. As a student said to my co-teacher and me about twenty years ago, "your so-called democracy is hypocritical because you can always fail us" (Baptiste and Brookfield, 1997, p. 34).

When power is concerned I've become aware of many instances in which I thought I was working in ways that students found empowering and supportive only to discover the opposite was the case. Actions and practices I believed to be unequivocally democratizing were experienced as manipulative surveillance. In this section I explore two of these: the circle and the teacher as a fly on the wall.

The Circle

One of my most provocatively disruptive investigations has been into the way students experience being put into a circle. Realizing this is not the benign, wholly relaxing, and empowering experience I assumed it to be has been like a little bomb of dissonance shaking up some of my long-settled understandings.

The very first day I went into teaching I became a furniture arranger. If it was at all possible I would get to class early to move the chairs out of their arrangement in neat rows and put them into a circle. I also learned, after some tense confrontations with facility staff members, to move them *back* into rows at the end of class. This is how janitors and custodians expected it to be and woe betide if you didn't conform.

Why would I spend so much time on pedagogic feng shui? Well to my way of thinking the circle is a physical manifestation of democracy, a group of peers facing each other as respectful equals. I assume the circle draws students into conversation and gives everyone an equal chance to be seen and heard. This respects and affirms the value of students' experiences and places their voices

front and center. In my own teaching, the circle has mostly been an unquestioned given. I've assumed that when students walk into a classroom and see the circle they heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves, "thank goodness I'm finally in a situation in which my voice counts and my experiences are valued." I've also assumed that having my chair in the circle signifies that I'm one of them and reduces the power differential between us.

Using the circle was a knee-jerk part of my practice for the first twenty years of my career. I remember riding the New York subway in the1980s to teach summer school in July and August and emerging drenched in sweat as from the fires of hell. Then I'd get to class to find the air conditioning was out of order. But, as always, I would conscientiously move tables and chairs into the best approximation of a circle I could manage. As the sweat trickled down my back or into my eyes I would say to myself, "the students will really appreciate being treated like adults." A little frisson of self-congratulatory pride would ripple pleasurably through me even as I began to feel faint from heat exhaustion. I'd give myself a mental pat on the back for being a truly respectful, humane, and democratic teacher.

But I also spent much of my first twenty years teaching in the concurrent role of student or learner. During the first ten years of my teaching career I went through graduate school as a part-time student. I acquired two diplomas, a master's degree, and a doctorate from four different universities during that period. So I spent a lot of time in class as a student. Then, when I was a newly minted PhD I was expected to attend professional conferences and participate in professional development as an indication of service and commitment to the academic field. So I spent many hours sitting in chairs at academic conferences.

Throughout all these diplomas, degrees, and conferences I had the same reaction every time I walked into a room and saw the chairs arranged in a circle. I would hear a voice saying, "oh no! Not the circle!" and realize it was mine—in my head. Seeing the circle my energy would drop and my anxiety rise and I'd think,

"now I'm going to have to 'share' with strangers as we exchange our ignorance for no other reason than that we're supposed to." I would also send a telepathic request to the teacher or presenter pleading, "why can't you just let me sit at the back, listen and absorb. When I feel ready to contribute I'll do so. But don't force me into speaking before I'm ready."

Then I'd get home from my student class or conference attendance, fall into bed exhausted, and get up the next morning for work. With no sense of irony or disjunction I would arrive at the center early, arrange the chairs into a circle, and think Carl Rogers was channeling through me as I created a genuinely student-centered, empowering learning environment. I somehow managed to disregard completely the lens of my own autobiographical student experience of the circle as unjustified coercion. As we shall see later in this book, rejecting the lens of personal experience as idiosyncratic and unreliable is very common.

It took two other lenses to open me up to the realization that the circle might not be the welcoming and helpful furniture arrangement I'd imagined. The first was the lens of students' eyes. After two decades teaching I finally got round to making a serious effort to find out how students were experiencing my classrooms by implementing the Critical Incident Questionnaire described in chapter 6. The regular anonymous feedback I received from students indicated that circles were experienced in far more complicated ways than I'd imagined. Students started talking about feeling like they were "being watched" in the circle, about there being "nowhere to hide" from the censorious gaze of their peers and the teacher. They said they felt most distanced in class when being "forced to speak" in the circle and how puzzling it was to have to share ignorance with a group of strangers.

Then the lens of theory kicked in. The ideas of the French cultural critic Michel Foucault (1980) were becoming widely known and I started to read applications of his ideas that analyzed classrooms as arenas of power (Ball, 2013; McNicol Jardine, 2005). A very helpful resource was Gore's *The Struggle for Pedagogies* (1992).

It was all laid out there. Rearranging furniture does not rearrange power relations. Students suspicious of academe who have been burned by previous educational experiences will mistrust the circle and be wary of entering it until they've come to trust the teacher. To them it'll be an arena of heightened surveillance in which, not knowing what's expected of them, they'll say or do the wrong thing in a way that's visible to all. So walking into a room and seeing the chairs set out that way will be intimidating not welcoming, aggressive not respectful.

I still use the circle as a class seating arrangement because I like there to be clear sight lines and I want everyone to feel they have the same opportunity to use nonverbal signals to let me know they want to contribute. But now, in what I hope is a critically informed way, I tell students why I arrange chairs this way. I say that just because it's a circle doesn't mean that I'm expecting people to speak and that they have a right to silence. I share that I won't assume that people who speak are smarter or more committed than those who don't and that I'm one of those who usually stay silent in a circle, at least initially. I need time to feel comfortable in a new group and to think and process ideas before I speak my understanding of them. I also need to be sure that the teacher is creating an environment in which saying the "wrong" thing won't be pounced on as a sign of ignorance or unpreparedness.

It's been interesting to see that, at least in my own classrooms, reassuring people that I won't assume their silence to signify inattention or carelessness has had the effect of galvanizing speech. The confident extroverts talk anyway but it seems there's less of a risk perceived by quieter students in saying the "wrong" thing. It also probably helps that I distribute a grading for participation rubric at the start of the semester that describes multiple ways for people to demonstrate participation without saying too much.

The Teacher as Fly on the Wall

I've always believed that the best kind of classroom is one in which students are in control of their learning. By that I mean that they

conceive and conduct their own learning projects, make their own connections between disparate ideas, and raise their own questions that they proceed to answer through self-initiated discussions. A lot of this orientation comes from my own preference for self-directed learning. In college I skipped as many lectures as possible, read the assigned texts on my own, and studied old exam papers to prepare myself for finals.

I also came of age professionally at a time when Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire and Bergman, 2000), Carl Rogers' *On Becoming a Person* (1961), and Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1970) were first being widely read. It was a heady intellectual bouillabaisse, a pinch of education as the practice of freedom, a soupçon of nondirective facilitation, a dash of teaching as a subversive activity, and a big dollop of dialogic learning. Not surprisingly, when I came to do a PhD my study explored the independent learning of working-class adults who had become experts in different fields despite leaving school early with no qualifications.

My formation as a teacher thus comprised a powerful trifecta of perfectly integrated assumptions.

Paradigmatic Assumption

People learn naturally in a self-directed way.

Prescriptive Assumptions

Good teachers should set the conditions for people to conduct their own learning, serve as resource persons when requested, and say as little as possible in discussions.

Causal Assumptions

Using learning contracts enhances self-directedness, saying as little as possible encourages students into voice, telling students to design the curriculum builds confidence and is experienced as liberating.

This trifecta boiled down to a simple injunction: get out of the way of students' learning as quickly as possible. I believed my natural teaching position was on the sidelines, shouting out encouragement when possible and providing assistance when asked. The metaphor I would most often invoke was that of the fly on the wall. To my mind the best classes would be those in which students didn't even notice I was in the room. They would be so engrossed in practicing new skills or exploring new knowledge that my presence would be entirely forgotten. If a class discussion comprised only student talk and my voice was silent throughout, then that would be the optimal kind of dialogue I was seeking.

Teachers like me who are committed to a vision of student-centered learning will do some very predictable things. We'll put students into groups, give only minimal instructions about what should happen, and then retreat from the scene to let students work as they wish. Our retreat, however, is often only partial. We rarely leave the room entirely for long periods of time because that would indicate we don't care about what students are doing. Instead, we sit at our desk or off in a corner observing groups getting started on their projects. In our minds we're ready to be called on to assist learning at a moment's notice.

In class discussions we'll refuse to say too much for fear of influencing or prejudicing what students are thinking. We want students to reason for themselves, not copy our thinking. So we turn students' questions back on them, asking students to hazard their responses to the question they've just asked of us. The power of the assumption that people are naturally self-directed learners and that institutions and bureaucracy only get in the way of this innate impulse leads us to do as little as possible for fear of corrupting a purely inner-driven process.

After forty-five years I'm still very drawn to this vision of teaching and believe it has a lot of truth. But three of the four lenses available to me—my personal experiences, students' feedback, and theory—have challenged and complicated it in multiple ways. I know from personal experience that when I'm in a class,

conference session, or professional development workshop I hate it when the first thing that happens is being put into a small group. I'll tolerate icebreakers but before participating in a more substantive group event I need some early input from the educator or leader. This helps me judge whether or not she or he can be trusted, is competent to lead the activity, is likely to give me something relevant or useful, and so on.

Sometimes I accept having my questions turned back on me, but when I'm genuinely clueless I find that strategy pointless. If I ask a question it's because I'm deeply interested in finding out someone else's own thinking on the matter in the hope that will help me learn something new. It seems like inauthentic game playing to have someone refuse to answer and instead ask me what I think. If I'm expected to answer a leader's questions, shouldn't he or she be expected to answer mine?

The lens of students' feedback has taught me that activities I introduce with the intent of democratizing participation still involve people watching me closely. As an example I think of Chalk Talk (Brookfield and Preskill, 2016). Chalk Talk is an exercise in which students and the facilitator write responses to a common question on a black- or whiteboard. It's intended to help visual learners and to democratize class participation. One of the most interesting comments students make when the posting is done and we start to talk about the resultant graphic is how they noticed the one or two posts I put up there, the question I raised, and the lines I drew. They say they assumed my post represented the correct response or right answer and so consequently they strove to respond to my posts. So an activity in which I feel I've merged into the background is actually one in which students watch me closely.

In class discussions I prefer to say as little as possible. I see my role as establishing the conditions under which good discussion happens and then letting the process go where it may. My responsibilities are to make sure protocols and ground rules set to promote inclusiveness are followed and to ask generative questions. But if a discussion ends with me saying virtually nothing I'm typically pleased by how

that demonstrates students have had total control over the day's session. My whole mission is to be unnoticed and unobserved. I want to blend in with the wallpaper, to become a fly on the wall.

For many years I believed that I had succeeded in this process of photoshopping myself out of teaching and learning classroom dynamics. It was only when I started collecting students' feedback on my courses that I realized how naive I was being. The situation of students forgetting entirely that I was even in the room is something that happens relatively rarely. It's pretty much totally absent from whole-class discussions, even those in which I say almost nothing. As I'm listening to students' comments I'm always being watched for my reactions. Am I smiling and nodding or frowning? Do I make eye contact or look away? Do I write down students' comments or is my notepad or screen blank? Does my saying nothing in response to a comment mean I'm withholding approval or does it signify tacit agreement?

Because of students' preoccupation with wondering what my silence really means I believe it's better to give some regular, albeit brief, indications of what's on my mind. If you know something of how students view silence you're in a much better position to ensure that your fly-on-the-wall presence has the helpful consequences you seek. You'll learn when, and how much, to disclose and the confidence-inducing effects of such disclosure. You'll also know when keeping your own counsel leads to students doing some productive reflection and alternatively when they're paralyzed with anxiety regarding your withholding responses to their comments.

Finally, analyses of classroom interaction informed by theory of critical pedagogy (Darder, Mayo, and Paraskeva, 2015; Kirylo, 2013) remind us that acting as the fly on the wall can actually disempower students, even as you think it's bringing them into voice. Standing back and not intervening in a conversation allows for the reproduction of differences of status and power within the classroom. We can close the classroom door to avoid being surveyed by a prowling department head, but we can't close the door to history, power, and culture.

Students who are members of minority groups and whose past experiences have produced legitimate fears about how they'll be treated in academe may hold back. Out of a fear of being browbeaten by the teacher or by students of privilege, or from a desire not to sound stupid because of their presumed ignorance of academic language and conventions, some students may elect for silence. Also, students who are introverts or those who need time for reflective analysis may find the pace of conversation intimidating. In this instance inequity caused by the intersection of personality and culturally imposed preferences (Cain, 2013), rather than that caused by race, class, or gender, distorts what seems to be a free-flowing conversation. Being a fly on the wall only serves to perpetuate existing power differentials.

Conclusion

In this chapter I've tried to concretize what it looks like to unearth assumptions of power.

Creating a circle and acting as a fly on the wall are done for emancipatory effect to equalize participation, acknowledge students as equals, and create inclusive environments. Both practices flow from the prescriptive assumption that good teachers democratize classrooms. Yet assuming a simple cause-and-effect connection between doing these practices and having students experience them as liberating is extremely problematic. On the contrary, they can end up marginalizing some students, creating a mistrust of teachers and leaving students feeling the subjects of surveillance.

In the case of the circle and the fly on the wall, critical reflection has also led me to a new understanding of justifiable power. I need to state my reasons for using the circle (to create good sight lines), acknowledge students' right to silence, and reassure people that their silence won't be construed as lack of diligence

or intelligence. I must also create protocols to allow all learners to participate. In the case of the fly on the wall I need to explain my role and my use of silence and intervene regularly to comment on how I think the class is going. In chapter 3 I examine the second kind of distinctive assumptions that critical reflection attempts to uncover: hegemonic assumptions.