

## How does Power influence on Learning in Korean Organizations?: How to facilitate learning in Korean organizations?

*Young-Saing Kim*  
KREI

*The subject into which this study inquired was the relationship between learning and power in Korean context. This study presents two case studies in two different organizations in Korea. Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis. Power semantics, rhetorical visions and informal learning model were used for analysis. The study identifies the way people formally and informally learn and patterns power operates, and relationship between power and learning in organizations.*

Keywords: Power, Korean Culture. Learning in Organizations

### Problem Statement and Research Question

This study began with a research question: Why application of imported HRD strategies imbedded in the Western culture was not successful in Korean organizations? Globalization and fierce competition push people to learn both instrumental and communicative knowledge. For example, innovative team structure and learning organization strategy are global trends. However, the researcher wonders how many local organizations in non-Western countries truly take advantages of them. From the researcher's experience and the results from this research, he does not want to recommend local organizations to import most HR strategies or programs, because it might be harmful for local companies in the western countries to bring Western HR into practice, until people are ready to critically reflect on the discrepancies between the local cultures and the assumptions of HR strategies or programs. These HR products necessarily come with culture, and require changes in culture to support those practices. The purpose of this study is to shed light on whether and how power relations in Korean organizations influence the way that people learn in organizations.

### Power and Discourse in Social Development

Power has long been a critical focus of discussion in adult education (Mezirow, 1998; Popkewitz, 1998), but less frequently in the HRD literature. Many adult education theorists try to analyze adult education in terms of power (Pietrykowski, 1996; Eisen & Tisdell, 2000). They argue that all human relationships, including adult learning and practice areas related to it such as HRD, are influenced by the control of power (Hart, 1990). To this point, the researcher has found that discourse as a process of rational dialogue is a crucial factor which has been treated as an assumption behind adult learning in the U.S. (Mezirow, 2000). Western culture values discourse which includes all kinds of verbal interactions aimed at problem solving through rational reasoning without emotional or violent expressions. Many adult education theories consider critical discourse and horizontal communication as fundamental assumptions of adult learning (Mezirow, 2000, Marsick, 1993). In contrast, the value of dialogue is uncommon in Korean culture. Korean people have not had an opportunity to learn how to dialogue or how to use discourse. The researcher treats discourse as the primary adult learning condition and the most influential factor for social development as well; setting democracy, facilitating human rights, constructing efficient organizations and increasing productivity. Discourse is to verbalize all social or physical phenomena to be discussible, understand them, and compare or negotiate different options and premises with rational reasoning.

Both Habermas (1976) and Mezirow (1991) assert that discourse and horizontal communication have been the impetus behind social development from human rights to material prosperity in the West. The Eastern countries have not yet experienced civil society's public sphere and, thus, its transformation has not been informed by common discourse and horizontal communication because its social structures are still vertically hierarchical and authoritarian. With this type of social structure and patterns of relationships, major adult education theories developed in the West do not fit within the Eastern countries at this time. It is assumed that learning rarely occurs without discourse since it is a primary condition for adult learning. If that is so, adult educators in non-western cultures need a strategy for facilitating discursive interactions in organizations.

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The adult learning concept of discourse in organizations is an assumption of major adult education theories that has not occurred in Korean culture. As a reflection of social cultural and institutional matters, it is argued here that organizations today would be the local public sphere of democratic decision-making through discourse for discursive interaction. Learning in organizations would be the key to making Korean organizations a kind of public sphere for an organizational transformation in Korea. And as many adult educators have noted, adult learning practitioners need to understand power that is the most critical variable in all social activities including learning and communication.

### **Two Understandings of Power vis-à-vis Learning**

The structure of unfair power distribution has been the most frequent subject of research on power. Some theorists argue that in adult education field, power has been described in terms of economic-politics, authors suggest eliminating power or power structure because it is inhumane and unjust in nature (Tisdell, 2000). Those ideological approaches to power are generally derived from the aftermath of Marxism and its impact on adult education. Ideological critique on social-economic inequality and its consequences on achievement gap between the rich and the poor, or the mainstream and the minority, and social reproduction of inequality through education systems are most popular. However, the nature of power in adult education has not been a main subject of adult education research. Nonetheless, any adult educators advise that “change agents” who design organizational change must consider the power structure of the organization first. Marxist studies are too ideological to investigate nature of power because they advocate ridding power from all adult education, rather than inquiring into it or testing it reflectively.

Power exists at the center of organizations. We need to inquire not only into problems caused by power, but into the nature of power that causes the problems. There are many approaches to promoting understanding of power. It is useful to investigate our understanding of power from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. Power in a quantitative perspective is based on the structure of how power is distributed: who has or who do not have power and how power is distributed by cultural context such as gender, race and socio-economic status. There is only one kind of power within this scheme, with a focus on structural factors of class, race and gender that situate people differently relative to the structure of power. Marxism explains this theoretical framework as quantitative perspective of power. In other words, power is a limited quantity of a fairly uniform nature, and people have more or less of this quantity. There is also a qualitative perspective on power. This perspective focuses on the nature of power: the characteristics of power and how power influences our life and organizations. Power is not just a series of prohibitions delimiting, proscribing and discouraging activities of lower-order organizational members, but it is productive networks of knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Power can be described as a skeleton of how organizations operate on their membership and their activities (Foucault, 1980). Power resides in a network of relationships which are systemically interconnected.

### **Disciplinary Power and Meaning Making**

Power that operates within meaning-making processes could be described as disciplinary power in Foucault’s works. Truth and knowledge are fundamental tools by which a group of people manage themselves. Bauman (1982. p.40, 41) captures the process of disciplinary power:

Power moved from the distant horizon into the very center of daily life. Its object, previously the goods possessed or produced by the subject, was now the subject himself, his daily rhythm, his time, his bodily actions, his mode of life. The power reached now toward the body and the soul of its subjects. It wished to regulate, to legislate, to tell the right from the wrong, the norm from deviance, the ought from the is. It wanted to impose one ubiquitous pattern of normality and eliminate everything and everybody which the pattern could not fit. Unlike the sovereign power which required only a ceremonial reminder of the timeless limits to autonomy, the emergent power could be maintained only by a dense web of interlocking authorities in constant community with the subject and in a physical proximity to the subject which permitted a perpetual surveillance of, possibly, the totality of his life process.

Knowledge which is constituted by discursive practices in a group of people reproduces through practices made possible by the framing of assumptions (Clegg, 1998). Thus, as the reality is constructed, so are the power relations, which cannot be separated from reality construction. Different knowledge based upon a different reality produces a new basis for constructing different power relations.

With Foucault's perspective, there are two approaches to understand the relationship between power and learning: understanding how power operates on the process of learning and how the consequences of learning affect the nature of power in organizations. It is necessary to understand how power works in Korean context. Korean has a complicated honorific system to express non-reciprocal power dynamic between listeners and speakers compared to English. Therefore, it is important for Koreans to notice power relations when they communicate: who is higher than the other in different ways. Argument or critique between participants who have to use different power semantics is unusual. Therefore, it is certain that the language system is related with the hierarchical power structure of Korean society, and a barrier against horizontal communication and reflective discourse. Shin (2001, p1) argues that "Honorific terms make young people be coward". Honorific terms would socially handicap the younger or the lower. For example, if lower staff has to use "sir", "dear" for higher staff in discussion, lower staff's ideas or opinions cannot be treated equally compared to those of higher staffs. The lower can have their voice only if they have superior ideas or justifications that can logically beat other ideas. Otherwise the higher easily ignore the lower or they keep silent. There is one exceptional case. Staff of the press companies does not use "dear" or "sir" to any of the higher or older. They train new staff to not use honorific terms for any one. It makes the lower less hesitating to speak up and have their voice because a different language system partially sets them free from the power structure. Therefore, they can say what they think even though the higher do not like it, and even though it is not easy for the higher or the older to accept less honorific language. Korean organizations prefer keeping vertical hierarchy instead of strengthening individual competence. That inhibits the development of horizontal relationships in Korean organizations (Shin, 2001). This example clearly shows how power in language influences not only relationship and organizational structure, but the shape of discourse and the nature of learning.

### **Informal Learning**

Watkins & Marsick (1993, p3) say that "informal learning has been a pervasive type of learning in the work place. Informal learning is predominantly unstructured, experiential and non-institutional." Informal learning occurs when people are involved in daily life at the workplace: team meetings, supervision, peer-to-peer communication, cross training, execution of their jobs and site visits. Zuboff (1988) claims that learning is not something that requires time out from being engaged in productive activity; learning is the heart of productive activity, therefore, learning becomes the new form of creative production. The informal learning model developed by Marsick and Watkins (1990) describes an unstructured type of learning that takes place in workplace when people are engaged in problem-solving in which people recognize power relations and have to deal with power. People learned through engaging in problem solving process by using reflection and discourse with others in natural settings. The researcher used this model to think about the kind of adult learning to find and analyze in this study.

### **Methodology**

An exploratory case study is conducted in two Korean organizations. These organizations are well-known as innovative institutions in Korea that have gone through various types of organizational changes. The first organization is ITKM (pseudonym) employing 120 people, and its main products are network solutions for small businesses, and convergence technology of TV, telephone, internal networking and the internet. This organization was trying to bring Western management theories into the work place: such as team structure, and a team learning system, and innovative communication and decision making strategies, into the work place.

The second organization is a project group of Exceedul(pseudonym) employing 50 people, an educational service providing company. Its main products are educational materials, such as lesson plans, texts, customized tutoring, and evaluation solutions. This organization required all staff to be involved in learning teams. The subject of this research is the telemarketing division of the organization. The telemarketing division was a customer service team of the company two years ago, and became a major division of the company because they developed a different market. As a result of their team learning, all former members of the learning team were promoted to be managers in the new division. They believe that team learning was most important to their success.

A number of data collection methods were used, including: theme and dialogue analysis (team meeting and interview), document analysis (staff document, staff meeting document, official biography, project document), demographic data survey, observation (staff meeting, official activities, team meeting) and interview (in-depth interview and opportunistic interview). All data for this study were collected from three groups in the two Korean organizations: executives, team leaders, and team members. All participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality. For data analysis this research used a set of coding schemes focused on key issues. At the same time, the researcher looked at unexpected issues that arose out of interviews, observation and document analysis. The

coding schemes included power semantics analysis and Rhetorical Discourse Analysis. Comparison between the two organizations was useful to extract more attractive information.

## Findings

How power works? First, with respect to how power operates in Korean organization, the researcher observed two kinds of power: sovereign power and disciplinary power. The researcher found a hierarchy of sovereign power in people's language during their conversations. Power relations were expressed by usage of honorific language: using honorific terms to the older or higher; equal terms to equals or colleagues; low terms to the younger or lower. The hierarchy was determined by two different variables: a traditional interlocking system of position and title in Eduexcell's TM team; the male gender was a more critical variable than age and position title in ITECH. This gender issue seems to be related to discrimination against women, which was based on Neo-Confucianism in Korea. Women seemed to be less active and less assertive in dialogue with male participants. In Eduexcell's TM team case, the researcher could not find any gender variable because all the TM team members were women.

The hierarchy of power relations in conversation seems to be dependent on the situation (e.g. topic, urgency) in which people engage in dialogue or discussion. The researcher observed three different modes of sovereign power in dialogues: mode A: hierarchical language, initiative taking, and dominant participation; mode B: mixed language, less initiative taking, and less dominant participation; mode C: non-hierarchical language, non-initiative taking or participation. In Eduexcell's TM team, mode A, B and C appeared, but in ITECH, only mode A and B appeared. In both cases, mode A appeared most frequently. The researcher infers that sovereign power in ITECH was more hierarchically dominant than in Eduexcell's TM team.

Disciplinary power was expressed by rhetorical visions in people's discursive interactions. In Eduexcell case, the rhetorical vision of working as a team was closely related to its member lives and practical issues. The members seemed to be actively involved in the process of developing and changing the rhetorical vision. For example, the members experienced a change of rhetorical vision from "Family vision" to "Team vision." This change of dominant rhetorical vision reflects that their team context, interpersonal issues, and distribution of role and authority changed. The vision was clearly presented to the team members. The clear rhetorical vision reflects that disciplinary power was pervasive and influential on the TM team. In ITECH case, the rhetorical vision of "competition in a turbulent world" did not seem to be closely related to people's lives and their workplace issues. The rhetorical vision was not shared by most employees. The vision was not clearly presented because of the ambiguity of the vision's themes. This reflects that disciplinary power was not strong or not well developed.

Second, with respect to the second question, how learning occurs in Korean organizations, this study indicates that formal and informal learning occur in different ways. Formal learning was managed and facilitated in opposite ways in the two cases. In ITECH, formal learning was controlled by the management. Formal learning was institutionalized in ITECH university, in which the employees had to take eight compulsory and several elective courses, as determined by the management. ITECH employed several communication strategies through which the management met employees in various settings. There were no strategies for facilitating informal learning through people's workplace experiences. In Eduexcell, formal learning was controlled by each learning team, in which members autonomously decided on their learning goal, objectives, strategies, and activities. The management provided various supporting conditions: offering leadership courses for the leaders of learning teams, financial support for learning activities, and facilitating a supportive atmosphere. The management minimized its interventions in learning teams.

The consequences of the strategies for learning were contrastive. In ITECH, formal learning or communication strategies were not actively practiced. The employees did not consider their teams as learning vehicles. The employees did not seem to be interested in the formal learning offered by the organization because the courses did not meet the employees' individual needs. The employees seemed to be resistant against management-driven HR strategies. In Eduexcell, the TM team members considered their team as a learning vehicle. TM team was actively learning both formal and informal ways. The members had a sense of ownership for their learning. That helped members be autonomous learners. Learning plan reflected both organizational and individual needs. Their learning was composed of formal and informal learning which were supplementing each other. The researcher found that informal learning occurred in both cases, but the ways which people informally learned were quite different. In Eduexcell, the TM team members actively engaged in informal learning, in which they solved common problems: improving socio-economic status and resolving conflicts. Key variables of their learning were discrimination in the environment against less schooled women, and discrepancy between members' different views. Members were proactive rather than reactive. They actively participated in informal learning processes. In ITECH, informal learning was individual problem solving in which people informally learned individual skills or strategies which

would ensure their own success or survival. Position title, informal structure, uneven information and competitive atmosphere were key variables of their informal learning. The employees were reactively involved in informal learning process.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Conditions for effective informal learning in a group of people are informed in **Table 1 & 2**. These depict critical conditions for effective informal learning in a group of people. When informal learning takes place in a group of people under the power relations in which authority and initiative are distributed hierarchically, and they do not have enough knowledge and disciplines in order to do each part of the model, only few who are ranked highly in the hierarchy would dominate information and opportunities for participation, and it would be hard for lay people to reveal their own different views or opinions from the high rankers'. When the lay people reveal or argue their own different views from the high rankers, the lay people might feel less security. The way how the group do frame problem, analyze problem, invent solution, develop skills and strategies, assess consequence and draw lessons would be distorted. There would be less synergy which produces effective learning, being critically reflective, being open to alternative views or being open to a new rational consensus as a legitimate validity. Therefore, the outputs of the informal learning in the group of people would be less productive or innovative. Even if some of them had the knowledge and discipline to do rational inquiries, they could not have had perform them because they would not have enough information, opportunities for participation, and could not be critical on the high rankers' views.

Why does informal learning take in a group of people? What is the critical factor to make learning in a group of people effective or not? Discourse is the key to answer those questions. The researcher would say that lack of discourse or ineffective discourse results poor learning. One of the critical conditions for productive informal learning is that people can participate in discourse freely with enough knowledge and disciplines to do it. Discourse represents the critical part of how people participate in learning in a group of people. It is facilitated or constrained by power relations in which sovereign and disciplinary power contend to one another. They would not carry out a rational inquiry into the problem, solution, or consequence, or lesson, if they do not enough knowledge and disciplines to do rational inquiries, such as weighing evidence fairly,

Table1. *When Effective Learning Do Not Occur, How Power, Discourse and Learning Interact One Another*

<i>Power</i>	<i>Discourse</i>	<i>Learning</i>
Sovereign power: hierarchical authority is dominant because authority is hierarchically distributed.	People do not have enough information because of unequal access to it, so that the high rankers in the hierarchy have more accurate and plentiful information than the others'.	Formal learning relies heavily on lecture, or one-directional instruction rather than discussion or any other collaborative works.
There is somewhat coercion		The authority has most control over formal learning, so most learner has no responsibility on their learning
Initiative is dominated unequally	Revealing and claming different views from the high ranker's might be dangerous.	Most informal learning is private. Its results are used by only the learner.
	People have not equal opportunity to participate, and do not feel security. Equal participation of the low rankers would be unsafe.	The authority has little or no control over informal learning.
		Output of informal learning is about political acumen through private connections.
		Objective of informal learning is about personal survival or success because of winner-loser situation.
Disciplinary power: disciplines such as standards, rules or values, or communicative knowledge is not well developed or executed, so that disciplinary power is weak	People are not able to weigh evidence objectively, or to become critically reflective on assumptions, and not willing to accept a new objective and rational consensus as a legitimate validity, so that rational inquiry becomes weak	Learning means the transmitting the information which the authority decides to people, or persuasion.
		Collective development or organizational change would be scarce.
		Creation of knowledge and innovation would hardly occur

Table 2. *When Effective Learning Occur, How Power, Discourse and Learning Interact One Another*

<i>Power</i>	<i>Discourse</i>	<i>Learning</i>
Authority is functionally distributed for the best results. There is no coercion	People have enough information because of equal access to it, so that everyone has accurate and plentiful information equally. Revealing different views would be welcomed	Formal learning relies on collaborative works, rather than lecture or instructional skills because they are ready actively to participate in. Everyone has some useful contribution to effective formal learning effort.  The authority and learners share responsibility over formal learning, so learners have some control on their learning.
Initiative is used equally	People have equal opportunity to participate. People feel security when they participate equally	Most informal learning is not only individual, but collective. The organization has some control over informal learning. Formal relations become information pipelines, rather than private connections. Output of informal learning is about innovative knowledge. People could share the results of their learning for facilitating win-win situations. Learning results would be used by individuals, teams, group and organization.
Disciplines or communicative knowledge is well developed	People are able to weigh evidence objectively, and to become critically reflective on assumptions, and willing to accept a new objective and rational consensus as a legitimate validity, so rational inquiry become used to	Learning becomes transformational as well as incremental. Objective of learning is about organizational development or change as much as individuals'.

## Discussion

Findings from this study lead the researcher to a model which would be more useful in understanding the informal learning. Informal learning models are produced by some theorists (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1999). Marsick and Watkins (1999) present a revised model which reflects non linear problem solving. This model reflects new insight into tacit beliefs, values, assumptions and unintended outcomes which had not been consciously and critically examined. However, there is only little attention on the context. An informal learning model produced by Marsick and Watkins (1999) depicts that the context of learning permeates every phase of the learning: how learner understand situation, what they learn, what solutions are available and how they use existing resources. It was found that the context heavily influences learning in it. However, there is no explanation about what kind of components compose the context, or how those components of the context shape learning in terms of theoretical perspectives, and how learning interacts with the context. This research would provide a shed of light on those questions. There are many components of the context. The context includes physical settings, relationships between people in organizations, organizational structure: distribution of works and authority, atmosphere of workplace, knowledge and culture. Figure 1 presents a model of informal learning which depicts how power, a critical component of the context, influence informal learning in a group of people by means of conditioning discourse, therefore, this model shows that power is the controlling variable of the context. Power as a core part of the context could be both a part of problematic experience and a factor of how people learn through the informal learning in a group of people. When a change of power relations occurs in the group, learners need to reframe problem, diagnosis problem again, and so on, because a change of power causes a change of the situation, and the nature of a problematic experience. At the same time, a change of power would change how they learn. Power relations regulate how critical resources are distributed, how people interact each other; share their learning and construct meanings together.

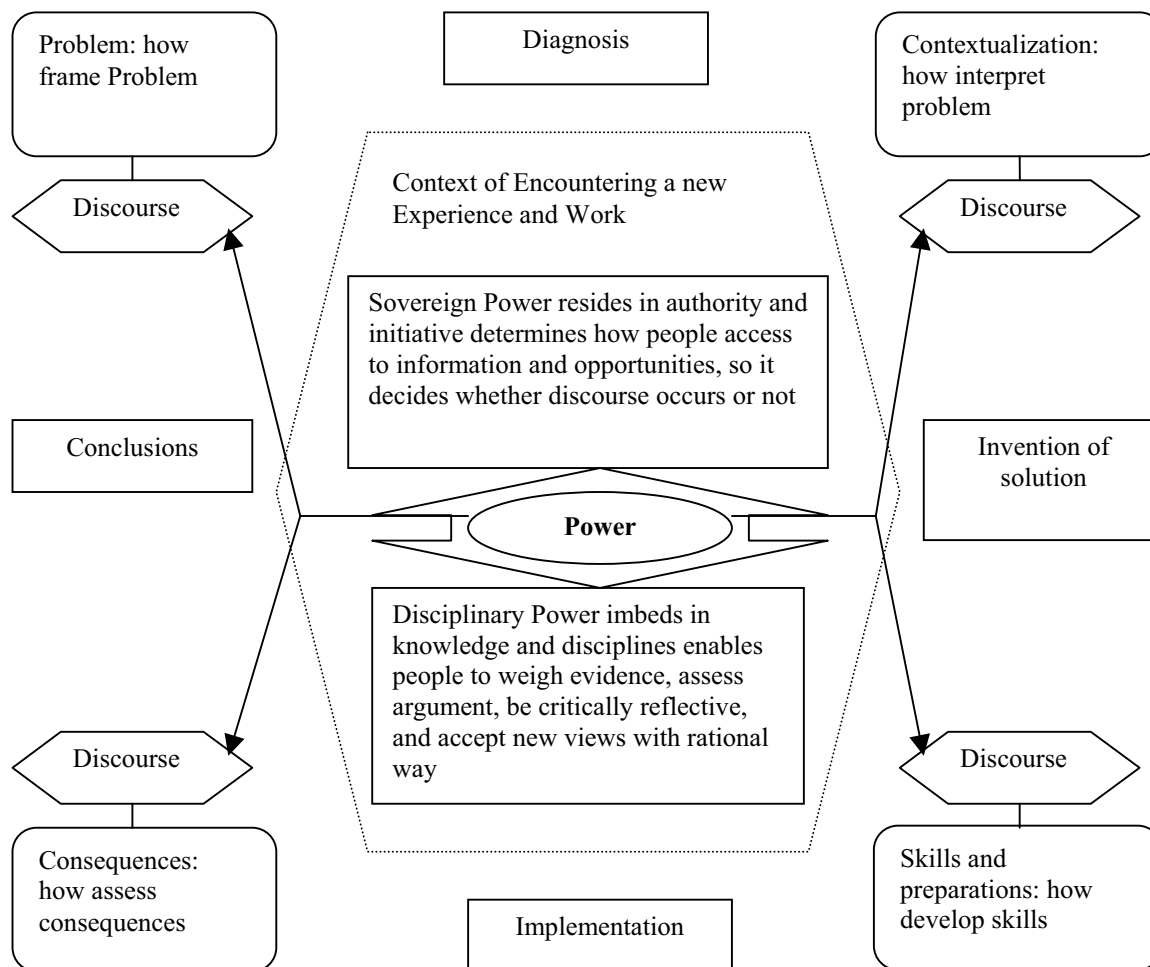


Figure 1. *A Model of Informal Learning in a Group of People*

People should look at both contextual factors and the developmental nature of the 10% to understand how it has the competitive edge. Contextual factors constitute the 90% of the iceberg. They include organizational or national cultures. The cutting edge of an organization comes from an effective coordination of the 10% of instrumental factors and the 90% of contextual factors. Contextual factors define the limits of the instrumental factors. As the context changes, an organization in which learning actively occurs will create the next instrument for a new environment. When people in the organization feel or recognize a necessary change or its elements, new ideas or successful cases from other organizations will give some inspiration to organizations, but can not be replicated in other organizations where the organizational context is different. If an organization replicates a series of fads composed of the 10% without encouraging learning, it will lose its learning ability. In this metaphor, the ice refers to knowledge; iceberg refers to the structure of knowledge; making the ice refers to learning. These are assumptions of the metaphor: when an organization remains competitive, the process of learning is necessary; it is possible to transform the knowledge structure after most knowledge is replaced.

It is important that HRD practitioners and adult educators openly recognize that, especially in cultures such as the one described above (and possibly all national cultures with far power distance in Hofstede's point of view(1980) ), the most critical factor influencing learning would be embedded in power. The cohesiveness of the culture masks significant patterns of traditional power. It is risky to try any intervention in power itself. Therefore, trying to explicitly facilitate a redistribution of power is a most unpractical approach for an adult educator in this setting. Instead, adult educators need to work to help senior managers and other organizational members realize the potential of disciplinary power in organizations through a learning process. When disciplinary power is prevalent in organizations, team or organizational learning will be valued.

If an organization wants to help its people learn, it should encourage disciplinary power that puts people under the control of the disciplines rooted in rational reasoning instead of the command and control based on personal authority. In this regard, it is useful to inquire into the potential of Action Science in terms of qualitative power and learning perspectives. Action Science would provide a rich resource to HR professionals interested in transformation of power when they make interventions. Local organizations have to have an understanding of themselves and their organizational context. The nature of power operating in the organization and local culture should be understood. HR practitioners need to assess power relations, composed of sovereign power and disciplinary power, before designing a HRD plan. Power semantic analysis would be one tool for sovereign power assessment in organizations. Rhetorical vision analysis method would be a framework for assessing how disciplinary power operates in organizations.

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