

# Power and Pedagogy: International Perspectives of Chinese and American Pedagogical Practices That Empower and Engage Students

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To ensure a student-centered campus, schools must integrate student empowerment in and out of the classroom. In China, this concept remains a novel idea. In the US, student empowerment outside of the classroom, for example, in student governance, is prevalent. However, faculty at-large still remains somewhat unaware that internal belief systems about power shape, not only the curriculum or content they are delivering, but also their choices of pedagogy. We assert that the internal political assumptions of an individual are manifested in the teaching styles selected by that individual. Little research exists to understand how individual faculty political perceptions correlate with classroom pedagogical practices that impact student learning. This paper provides a conceptual foundation for embarking upon empirical study of this fascinating phenomenon.

*Keywords:* higher education, pedagogy, student-centered learning

## Introduction

A student-centered school or classroom is where students are genuinely empowered, sharing authority and leadership with faculty, administrators and staff. When students are empowered by faculty, “Negotiations around power are an unavoidable part of the teaching-learning process” (Tai, 1998, p. 426). Some educators may reject the assertion that faculty possess power and are distributors of power in the classroom. Yet, most educators would likely agree that empowering students is an important function for encouraging students to take an active role in their own learning.

The distribution of power and negotiations of power are two constructs in the political organizational perspective (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to apply the political lens, particularly the constructs of power, to discuss recent literature on student-centered pedagogy in China and the US (United States). Findings indicated that cultural differences remain prevalent in pedagogical practices in both countries. Faculty could benefit from cross-cultural and international dialogue about teacher philosophy of power, the empowerment of students and what it means to create and sustain student-centered learning environments.

In spite of many national and international movements towards student-centered pedagogy, the lack of student empowerment permeates many campuses. Numerous scholars have expressed concerns about the lack

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of student power in the classroom which leads to student disengagement from learning (Cook-Sather, 2002; Hemmings, 2001; McQuillan, 2005; Willis, 2003). Through a robust comparison of Chinese and American faculty knowledge structures, Liu (2010) suggested that faculties in both countries empower students through the use of constructive pedagogical approaches. With greater emphasis on constructivist pedagogical practices, less has been written about how teacher or faculty philosophical assumptions of power impact or affect pedagogical practices. In many ways, a faculty member's internal philosophy about power is manifested in the pedagogical practices employed.

There are several case studies of educational organizations that seek to share or distribute power from administrators and teachers to the students. McQuillan (2005) described Frontier High School, a school in a Western city, as an exemplar of a student-centered campus:

The entire school community comes together to consider issues of school-wide interest. The curriculum includes a service learning component that is shaped, in part, by student interests. Professional development is routine, and leadership responsibilities and opportunities are distributed throughout the school. Classrooms tend to be student centered and often student directed. Performance assessment and project-based learning are common. Faculty not only teach, but serve as student advisors. And student empowerment, in its various dimensions, is an explicit priority. (pp. 652-653)

To ensure a student-centered campus, schools must integrate student empowerment in and out of the classroom. In China, this concept remains a novel idea. In the US, student empowerment outside of the classroom, for example, student governance, is prevalent. However, faculty at large still remains somewhat unaware that the internal belief systems about power shape, not only the curriculum or content they are delivering, but also their choices of pedagogy. We assert that the internal belief systems about power or the political assumptions of an individual are manifested in the teaching styles selected by that individual. In other words, faculty who value decentralized or representative political systems will be likely to employ the concepts of those systems in their own interactions with students, choosing more constructivist approaches. Faculty who value authoritative or centralized systems of political interactions will be likely to employ behavioral approaches with students. Research is needed to understand how individual faculty perceptions of power correlate with their classroom pedagogical practices and ultimately, student learning.

### **Political Perspective on Empowering Students**

Scholars have examined pedagogy through the lens of power, particularly as it relates to empowering students (Singer & Pezone, 2001; McQuillan, 2005; Peabody, 2011). Teachers at high performing schools are often "proponents of giving students real choices, decision-making power and ownership over aspects of curriculum planning" (Peabody, 2011, p. 186). "Student empowerment also seems a logical reaction to current demands for school reform and accountability" (McQuillan, 2005, p. 639). Schools cannot significantly improve achievement or enact meaningful changes, if students remain only passive recipients of reforms advocated by administrators and teachers.

Student empowerment involves three primary dimensions: academic dimensions, political dimensions and social dimensions, which are intertwined with each other (McQuillan, 2005). An example of academic empowerment is provided in the case of Frontier High School where an academic policy is used to promote greater mastery of coursework. Students receive an incomplete grade, if their performance on the assignment does not demonstrate mastery and they are encouraged to repeat the work, until it is completed satisfactorily.

Social empowerment has an important pedagogical dimension, and it promotes teacher-student dialogue for feeling safe to speak, and all voices to be heard and respected (Singer & Pezone, 2001). Social empowerment is also shaped by institutional structures and policies that influence the student's experience.

Social empowerment can be vertical in student-to-administrator or student-to-faculty relationships. Faculty and administrator scan creates structures and policies that promote supportive ties with institutional agents, meaning that students are able to keep ongoing relationships with adults in the system that adds direction for student learning (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Furthermore, social empowerment can be lateral in student-to-student relationships where students learn how to support and empower one another (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In the case of Frontier High School, vertical empowerment was demonstrated when faculty and clinical professors instituted town meetings, a leadership committee and advisory committee to "empower students politically by soliciting their input on various issues" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 646).

### **Empowering Students in Student Affairs Divisions**

Over the past decades, scholars in the discipline of student affairs have conceptualized its primary educator role as empowering students to participate in meaningful decision-making (Engstrom, Hallock, & Riemer, 2002; Caruso, Bowen, & Adams-Dunford, 2006; Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, & McDonald, 2007; Frost, Strom, Downey, Schultz, & Holland, 2010). Co-curricularly, students construct issues of power and authority in residentially based self-governance programs (Enstrom et al., 2002). Curricularly, scholars have proposed the "Social Change Model of Leadership Development" as a framework for faculty to implement in designing and evaluating curricula that met the demands of developing socially responsible students (Nickels, Rowland, & Fadase, 2011).

### **Three Constructs of Empowerment**

Hoy and Miskel (2001) proposed three constructs of empowerment: avoiding coercive power; using organizational power to develop personal power, and using personal power to motivate and create commitment. The appropriate use of power by administrators and faculty can make a difference in how to connect students' feelings to the school, classmates and teacher, thereby affecting students' motivation and success (Alderman & Green, 2011).

#### **Avoiding Coercive Power**

Coercive power in the educational setting is a teacher's ability to influence students by punishing them for undesirable behaviors. The use of coercive power pervades traditional teacher-centered instruction, which sometimes provokes students' resistance. However, as a negative case, findings from a study in China indicated that students preferred teacher-centered instruction and refused a student-centered language learning classroom (Liu, 2010). More common types of student resistance to teacher-centered classrooms or teacher control are students' resistance against teacher control over the selection of textbooks, course materials, classroom activities, class topics, and the amount, type and frequency of homework (Sakai, Takagi, & Chu, 2010). According to Zull (2002; as cited in Harris & Cullen, 2008), "The more teachers employ control measures, the more students are resistant to learning" (p. 61). For educators to avoid students' resistance, a philosophical shift in the minds of teachers about power is required. This is not a small paradigm shift that will impact the choice of pedagogical methods where individual learners are accorded

more power to “control over what is learned, how it is learned and how the learning is measured” (Reynolds, 2006, p. 4).

Administrators and teachers must avoid using coercive power, especially in a student-centered context, because it “typically erodes the use of referent power and creates hostility, alienation and aggression among subordinates” (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 226). The use of coercive power for disciplinary purpose should be minimized and implemented in combination of other social powers, such as manipulation, expertness and likability (Alderman & Green, 2011). With the avoidance of coercion, the traditional teacher-centered campus submerged in the custodial school climate and might give way to the humanistic school climate characterized by a “democratic atmosphere with two-way communication between pupils and teachers and increased self-determination” (Hoy & Miskel, 2001, p. 205). Schools can use organizational power to develop personal power.

### **Using Organizational Power to Develop Personal Power**

Schools, immersed in a healthy school climate absent from coercion and teacher-centeredness, have the unique opportunity of developing the personal power of individual teachers and students. Committed to teaching and learning, teachers set reasonably high standards for students, share power, trust students and serve as advisors. Students are highly motivated in academic performance, participation in student affairs and leadership in student organizations. Thus, faculty awards students’ authority (as opposed to a grade). Awarding authority, composed of freedom, power and legitimacy, can “connect students to, rather than separate them from, school” (Goodman, 2010, pp. 243-244). Frontier High School encourages teachers to shift power to students. High school students are given ground rules and come to learn how to use power, while providing feedback on courses of interest, including the ability to lobby for an independent study (McQuillan, 2005). Students, who exercise a voice in curricular decisions demonstrate enhanced academic performance, are motivated to assume leadership responsibilities and are encouraged to play an active role in activities on and off campus (Cook-Sather, 2002).

### **Using Personal Power to Motivate and Create Commitment**

Empowered students “develop the ability, confidence and motivation to succeed academically” (Cummins, 1986, p. 22). In Frontier High School’s “democratic learning community”, everyone is a combination of learner and teacher, and everyone “accepts responsibility for supporting, encouraging and assuring learning by their peers” (McQuillan, 2005, p. 653). Muncy and McQuillan (1996) found that, in those schools where administrators and teachers encouraged and nurtured students’ participation, it was more likely to sustain and deepen classroom and school-wide changes, and that students in such schools often became proponents of change. Cook-Sather (2002, p. 10) stated that, when schools listened, students felt both more engaged and inclined to take more responsibility for their education, because “it is no longer something being done to them but rather something they do”.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

For the fulfillment of student empowerment, the problem of external pressure from beyond the walls of a school must be addressed. The comparative study of Chinese and US teachers’ knowledge of pedagogical practices and content is a good case for discussion (Liu, 2010). The teachers were professionally trained and

well-equipped with instructional strategies, but they had to withdraw their personal ideas and ideals to fulfill the goals and objectives set up by national and provincial educational institutions. External administrative policies dwarfed everything else on campus. The Chinese teachers teach and students learn for one common purpose, to pass EEU (the Entrance Examination to University). Liu (2010) concluded that, "The different contexts in the two countries led to their different levels of professional knowledge" (p. 155), and that, "... It is environmental pressure rather than teachers' knowledge that shapes the ultimate outcome of Chinese students' performance" (Liu, 2010, p. 156). This poses some major implications, as both national and state interests in the US are becoming more focused on demonstrations of student learning through standardized assessments. At this writing, Chinese teachers used pedagogy directly and aimed at high test scores much more than their American counterparts did. However, this could soon change.

There are many other issues that impact a teacher's choice of pedagogy beyond his/her assumptions of power. One is the level of oversight and proximity to teachers that governments in countries use to manage education. Comparatively speaking, the American system in which there is no national system of education, but rather a state-centric system, generally results in less interference in decision-making where teachers are entrusted with more professional space to self-regulate their "content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge" (Liu, 2010, p. 151). Therefore, the topic of reducing the impact of external resources upon a student-empowering environment must be considered seriously.

Second, inside the school, administrators hold the key to exploiting the student-centered campus. Therefore, they must explore ways to empower students. Schools must enact a commitment to student empowerment and take the initiative in creating programs. They should be willing to live up to Frontier High School's principal's promise that "We wanted to act on kids' ideas" (McQuillan, 2005, p. 660). They must help students learn how to use power by providing guidelines for students and build on synergies of student ideas. Mutual trust between the school and students has to be established, because trust is essential to empowerment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Morris, 2004).

Third, teachers should empower students through constructive pedagogical practices. Teachers model and shape the ways in which students process knowledge and negotiate power. Liu's (2010) comparative research findings indicate that American students are more capable of independent thinking and analyzing, because American teachers are more likely to use creative and inquiry-based teaching method. However, Chinese students outscore American students in international science competitions, because Chinese teachers use a lot of direct instruction, or in Eckstein and Noah's terms "chalk and talk", to make knowledge instruction more efficient. American teachers tend to use concrete and pictorial ways to represent abstract concepts. They encourage students' creativity and inquiry by using various activities. They consider autonomy, egalitarianism, self-reliance and individualism as essential educational values. In contrast, Chinese teachers attach more importance to students' conceptual understanding by relying on traditional and rigid procedures, developing abstract thinking and integrating prior knowledge. In China, teachers provide chances for repetition of information and ask appropriate questions to check students' understanding. Chinese teachers develop quality teaching practices based upon well-articulated objectives, and are driven by high standards and genuine accomplishments.

Therefore, to establish a student-centered environment, teachers and students must negotiate with one another for more students' authority. This means teachers must yield substantially from their traditional

territory and support active student engagement in learning. After students take ownership of their own learning, they can learn to take responsibility for it (Harris & Cullen, 2008).

Fourth, educational administrators must consider that student organizations and communities are an excellent arena for students to feel truly empowered and safe, thereby, exercising and improving student's leadership skills. Therefore, schools should support, guide and facilitate these organizations, understanding that leaders in these organizations need not only students' participation, but also adults' support and trust.

Finally, in China, student affairs divisions could be developed to become more responsible for the matters related to student wellbeing by designing inclusive programs in which students are actively engaged in the design and implementation process. Students can learn to take responsibility to resolve their own issues and no longer have to depend upon a dominant authority figure. Students can also learn how to negotiate with staff, and more importantly, with their peers to promote mutual trust and respect and practice leadership.

### Conclusions

Hoy and Miskel (2001) stated that, "Learning is a complex cognitive process and there is no one best explanation of learning" (p. 41). When it comes to empowering students in the classroom, a teacher's use of pedagogical practices make a critical difference. In the Chinese context, teachers dominate what happens in the classroom. As a result, students wait to be fed and demonstrate reluctance to initiate and explore. Students in China do not generally express desires to negotiate for power and have even, at times, refused to be empowered. Conversely, exposed to an environment of autonomy, creativity and independent thinking, American students are much more empowered to express their own ideas, thereby developing their own solutions to problems. It will be interesting to see if pedagogical practices in these two countries soon switch places, as Chinese educational practices are becoming more student-centered and American educational practices are becoming more assessment-driven.

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