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Alan H. Jones, Publisher  
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# Educational Foundations

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# What Can We Do for You! What Can "We" Do for "You"?: Struggling over Empowerment in Critical and Feminist Pedagogy

By Jennifer M. Gore

"Empowerment" is a term used in a range of current educational discourses. For example, there are conservative discourses (e.g., Maeroff, 1988) which equate empowerment with professionalization and seem to employ the term for rhetorical purposes which result in little shift in relations of power; liberal humanist discourses (e.g., Yonemura, 1986) which aim at the "empowerment" of individual teachers, student teachers, and students and the alteration of power relations within the classroom; and critical and feminist discourses (e.g., Culley, 1985; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1988; Shor & Freire, 1987; Shrewsbury, 1987; Simon, 1987) which are concerned with societal relations of power and hold more collective and avowedly political notions of empowerment. Because of their roots in specific liberatory and emancipatory political projects we might be least likely to question the claims to empowerment of the critical and feminist

Jennifer M. Gore  
is a doctoral  
candidate in the  
Graduate Department  
of Curriculum  
and Instruction,  
School  
of Education,  
University  
of Wisconsin,  
Madison,  
Wisconsin.

discourses. Precisely for this reason, and because my own practice as a teacher educator is grounded in critical and feminist traditions, I limit this paper to an analysis of discourses within those traditions.<sup>1</sup>

My major aim is to point to some weaknesses or shortcomings in the construction of "empowerment" by critical and feminist educational discourses which create problems internal to those discourses. Rather than seek to legitimate or celebrate critical and feminist discourses, I want to look for their dangers, their normalizing tendencies, for how they might serve as instruments of domination despite the intentions of their creators (Sawicki, 1988). Michel Foucault says: "Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object and reflects on it as a problem" (Rabinow, 1984, p.388). As is consistent with many poststructural analyses (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Sawicki, 1988), my aim is to be "thoughtful" about constructions of truth, power, knowledge, the self, and language in these discourses. Specifically, I draw on Foucault's notion of "regime of truth" to reflect on problems of power relations and knowledge internal to the critical and feminist discourses. To do so, I have selected examples which illustrate clearly the potential dangers of those discourses. At the same time, however, I wish to acknowledge that some work within the critical and feminist traditions at least begins to address the kinds of weaknesses I outline here (e.g., Cherryholmes, 1988; Ellsworth, 1989; Lewis, 1988 & 1989; Marshall, 1989). Of particular note is the feminist poststructuralist work of scholar/teacher Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989). Following her initiative, this paper cautions those of us who profess and practice empowerment within critical and feminist discourses against didactic claims of "what we can do for you." My aim is not to immobilize or paralyze us from continuing that work. Rather, I hope to strengthen my own and others' understanding and practice within critical and feminist traditions.

My focus is on those critical and feminist educational discourses that emphasize empowerment. Interestingly, those discourses seem to also claim for themselves the label "pedagogy"; that is, discourses of "critical pedagogy" and "feminist pedagogy." While other critical educational discourses and other feminist discourses address pedagogy and have relevance to pedagogy, pedagogy is not their object. Nor, interestingly, is "empowerment" central to these "non-pedagogy" discourses. This observation leads me to wonder how empowerment and pedagogy are connected. Thus, a secondary aim of the paper is to explore the connection of empowerment to pedagogy in discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy. I shall explicitly address this issue near the end of the paper.

The fields of critical and feminist pedagogy are complex and fragmented. Through an analysis of the contemporary academic literature in critical and feminist pedagogy I have begun to explore not only the separation of these two fields, but distinctions within each field (Gore, 1989b, forthcom-

ing). In critical pedagogy, the central distinction emerges in relation to groups of its central proponents. Most obviously a strand of critical pedagogy which emphasizes a particular (if shifting) social vision, the construction of critical pedagogy by Giroux and McLaren, is separate/d from a second strand of critical (liberatory) pedagogy which emphasizes instructional processes in specific contexts, the construction of critical pedagogy by Freire and Shor. The distinctions in feminist pedagogy can be most clearly linked to the institutional location of its writers. One strand of feminist pedagogy emphasizes instruction and is located in departments of women's studies. A second strand which emphasizes a feminist social vision emerges, perhaps ironically, from the context of schools of education. While particular writers can be named within each strand (e.g., Culley, Shrewsbury, Schniedewind in women's studies; Grumet, Maher in education), feminist pedagogy does not yet appear to have its "leaders" or "authorities" in the way that critical pedagogy clearly does. Another distinction within feminist pedagogy can be drawn around the variety of stances within feminism that are reflected but often not acknowledged in the discourses of feminist pedagogy. It is not within the scope of this paper to map out these distinctions in detail but, simply stated, much of the feminist pedagogy literature emerges out of liberal and radical feminist traditions.<sup>2</sup>

It is from these discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy that I will be drawing examples as I return to my primary aim of identifying weaknesses in constructions of empowerment. It is not my purpose to criticize specific discourses as having specific weaknesses so much as I hope to illustrate, through examples, general tendencies among the critical and feminist pedagogy discourses. The normalizing tendencies, or dangers, of these discourses can be located in: (1) presuppositions inherent in the term empowerment which are taken on by the discourses and, closely related, (2) their unreflexive use of empowerment rhetoric. I elaborate each of these in turn.

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## **Problematic Presuppositions**

The term "empowerment" has no particular meaning prior to its construction within specific discourses; that is, it is important to acknowledge that the meanings of words are always "up for grabs," that there are no essential meanings--only ascribed meanings (Weedon, 1987). Social definitions of terms are products of the contexts surrounding their use and the discourses in which they are embedded.

Nevertheless, while its specific meanings must be identified within discourses, the term "empowerment" often does, more generally, presuppose:

(1) an agent of empowerment, (2) a notion of power as property, and (3) some kind of vision or desirable end state. It is my contention that discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy construct empowerment in ways consistent with these underlying presuppositions. I elaborate these arguments by addressing each of the three presuppositions in turn: first, clarifying how the presupposition seems inherent to the term "empowerment"; next, illustrating its manifestation in some discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy; and finally, pointing to theoretical weaknesses and oversights within these discourses that are created by taking on the presupposition in the construction of empowerment.

### **The Agent of Empowerment**

To em-power denotes to give authority, to enable, to license. As such, it is a process which requires an agent--someone, or something, to em-power. Even the notion of "self-empowerment" presumes an agent--the self.

When discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy espouse "self-empowerment" the distinction made is not around the agent of empowerment but around the subject of empowerment--that is, who is (to be) empowered. Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1989), for instance, speak frequently of "self and social empowerment," distinguishing between, and connecting, the empowerment of individuals and social positions. The following statement by McLaren (1989) provides an example: "Teachers must engage unyieldingly in their attempt to empower students both as individuals and as potential agents of social change by establishing a critical pedagogy that students can use in the classroom and in the streets" (p.221). The agent of empowerment in this example, and generally in critical pedagogy, is the teacher while the subject of empowerment is more than the individual student.

Strong senses of human agency and optimism pervade claims about the teacher as empower-er in ways which portray the teacher's role as crucial and sometimes even as omnipotent. The following statement by Culley (1985) is an extreme example of this approach to empowerment: "The feminist teacher can be a potent agent of change who, through combinations of course content and process, has the power to replace self-hatred with self-love, incapacity with capacity, unfreedom with freedom, blindness with knowledge" (p.21). Likewise in critical pedagogy, we find statements which place the teacher as the agent of empowerment. For example, McLaren, in addressing the "kinds of theories educators should work with" and the "knowledge they can provide in order to empower students," says "empowerment means not only helping students to understand and engage the world around them, but also enabling them to exercise the kind of courage necessary to change the social order where necessary" (McLaren, 1989, p.182). Teachers are to do the empowering.

My major concerns are that these claims to empowerment attribute extraordinary abilities to the teacher, and hold a view of agency which risks ignoring the context(s) of teachers' work. Teachers are constrained by, for example, their location in patriarchal institutions (Grumet, 1988) and by the historical construction of pedagogy as, and within, discourses of social regulation (Hamilton, 1989; Luke, 1989). Overly optimistic views of the agent of empowerment also set up serious shortcomings in the use of empowerment rhetoric which shall be elaborated later.

### Power as Property

Another major shortcoming of constructions of empowerment in critical and feminist pedagogy discourses is that they conceive of power as property, something the teacher has and can give to students. To *em-power* suggests that power can be given, provided, controlled, held, conferred, taken away. For example, Shrewsbury (1987) describes the vision of feminist pedagogy as including "a participatory, democratic process in which at least some power is shared" (p.7) and "the goal is to increase the power of all actors, not to limit the power of some" (p.8). While Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1989) have recently begun to refer to power as embodied in concrete practices, they still talk of "sharing power" in ways which remain locked within a view of power as property. "Giroux assumes that schools must be seen...as complexes of dominant and subordinate cultures, each ideologically linked to the power they possess to define and legitimate a particular construction of reality" (McLaren, 1989, p.200) (emphasis added).

Power as property is often, but not necessarily, connected with a "zero-sum" understanding of power which suggests that there is only so much power and that if teachers "give" some of it to students, they must "give up" some of their own power. Such an understanding of power is implied in Kathryn Pauly Morgan's (n.d.) characterization of the paradox of democratic pedagogy:

If the feminist teacher actively assumes any of the forms of power available to her--expert, reward, legitimate, maternal/referent--she eliminates the possibility of educational democracy in the feminist classroom; if she dispenses with these in the name of preserving democracy, she suffers personal alienation, fails to function as a role model, and abandons the politically significant role of woman authority. In short, she stops functioning as a feminist

teacher. (p.51)

Some of the early "resistance" work in education points to the inadequacy of conceptions of power as property or zero-sum. For example, in Paul Willis' (1977) study, *Learning to Labour*, the teachers were not alone in being able to exercise power. The "lads" exercised their own power also. And the effects of the exercise of power were contradictory and partial.

While Willis' study only pointed to the operation of power as contradictory, Foucault (among others) has elaborated a view of power which reveals weaknesses of the property and zero-sum conceptions. Rather than conceiving of power as a possession or a commodity, a thing to be held or exchanged, Foucault (1980) argued instead that power is "exercised, and... only exists in action" (p.89):

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target. They are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (p. 98)

Theoretically, Foucault's analysis of power raises questions about the possibility of em-powering. First, it refutes the idea that one can give power to (can em-power) another. Thus, to accept a view of one's work as giving power (as property) to others/Others (I will return to this in my discussion of the use of empowerment) is to overly simplify the operation of power in our society. Given Foucault's conception of power as "circulating," "exercised," and existing "only in action," empowerment cannot mean the giving of power. It could, however, mean the exercise of power in an attempt (that might not be successful) to help others to exercise power. That is, Foucault's analysis of power doesn't preclude purposeful action; it does point out the rather strong possibility that our purposes might not be attained.

Second, conceiving of power as exercised points immediately to the

need for empowerment to be context specific and related to practices. As I have already indicated, discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy have tended to "de-contextualize" empowerment. Their concern for context at the broad level of societal relations and institutions and ideologies (be they capitalist and/or patriarchal) leads to totalizing or universalizing tendencies which imply their concern is for "all teachers" or "all students" or "all women." Understanding power as exercised, rather than as possessed, requires more attention to the micro dynamics of the operation of power as it is exercised in particular sites, that is, conducting an "ascending analysis of power, starting...from its infinitesimal mechanisms" (Foucault, 1980, p.99).

### What Is the Vision of Empowerment Anyway?

Critical and feminist pedagogy discourses frequently perpetuate a simplistic dichotomy between empowerment and oppression through a level of abstraction which mystifies the meanings ascribed to either term (empowerment or oppression). Ellsworth (1989) has illustrated this point by citing some of the ways in which critical discourses answer the question: Empowerment for what? The vision is of empowerment:

for "human betterment," for expanding "the range of possible social identities people may become" and "making ones' self present as part of a moral and political project that links production of meaning to the possibility for human agency, democratic community, and transformative social action." (p.307)

But what does all this mean at the level of the school or classroom? And how are teachers to turn this "macro" vision into the "micro" of their daily practices in classrooms? Such questions have historically plagued radical educational work as it struggles with the contradictory demands of traditional radical political ideals and institutional work in the academy (Wexler, 1987; Liston & Zeichner, forthcoming).

The perpetuation of a dichotomy between empowerment and oppression also stems from a shift in conceptions of power as repression to power as productive, such that empowerment is linked with a productive conception of power and oppression is linked with a repressive conception. For example, Shrewsbury (1987) states that "by focusing on empowerment, feminist pedagogy embodies a concept of power as energy, capacity, and potential rather than as domination" (p.8). In this view, power is either productive or repressive. I will argue shortly that attempts to empower can



(and probably will) have inconsistent effects.

What I find most troubling is the theoretical pronouncement of these discourses as empowering or liberatory. For example, McLaren (1989) claims that:

we can consider dominant discourses (those produced by the dominant culture) as "regimes of truth," as general economics of power/knowledge, or as multiple forms of constraint.... A critical discourse is...self-critical and deconstructs dominant discourses the moment they are ready to achieve hegemony. (p.181)

In this statement, critical discourses are presented as liberatory primarily because they challenge dominant discourses, not because they have been liberatory for particular people or groups. Meanwhile, the "self critical" nature claimed for critical discourses seems more rhetorical than actual. While Giroux and McLaren occasionally reframe or clarify aspects of their argument as their project continues to shift with time, the possibility that their academic construction of critical pedagogy might not be the emancipatory discourse it is intended to be is not articulated by these theorists. Rather, teachers are exhorted to "take as their first concern the issue of empowerment"; empowerment which "depends on the ability of teachers in the future to struggle collectively in order to create those ideological and material conditions of work that enable them to share power, to shape policy, and to play an active role in structuring school/community relations" (Giroux, 1988, p.214). In short, empowerment depends on teachers using and actualizing this discourse of critical pedagogy.

Contrary to this view, Sawicki (1988) argues that "no discourse is inherently liberating or oppressive. ...The liberatory status of any discourse is a matter of historical inquiry, not theoretical pronouncement" (p.166). Does this suggest that by focussing only on "dominant" discourses McLaren has missed an opportunity afforded by the concept "regime of truth?" Bové (1988) argues that many leading humanistic intellectuals misread Foucault "to blunt the political consequences of his critique of their disciplines, their discourses, and their own positions within the knowledge/power apparatus" (p.xi). The political consequences of Foucault's critique include questioning of the ideological, discursive, and political positions of "oppositional" discourses. To capitalize on this interpretation of Foucault's work would require more contextualization of empowerment rhetoric. That is, in addition to the theoretical pronouncement about emancipatory potential currently found, there would need to be more historical or empirical inquiry of empowerment

in particular sites and discourses.

This general problem of decontextualization is perhaps more apparent in the critical discourses than it is in the feminist pedagogy discourses where there can be found many more attempts to address specific contexts. With the 1960s radical feminist premise that "the personal is political" (Jaggar, 1983), an insight which still has currency in contemporary feminisms, the feminist pedagogy literature reveals a much greater emphasis on actual classrooms and classroom practices (e.g., consider the collections edited by Bunch & Pollack, 1983; Culley & Portuges, 1985; Schniedewind & Maher, 1987) and seems less inclined toward grand theorizing. However, many of these accounts are rather descriptive and individualistic in their presentation of context and pay little attention to the location of their practices in educational institutions. Despite any differences related to "feminist process" or "feminist pedagogy," or to a student population consisting primarily of women, teaching feminism in a women's studies classroom remains an act of pedagogy in an educational institution.

When much of the empowerment rhetoric pertains to practices which could or should take place within universities and schools, we must ask how much freedom can there be within the institutional and pedagogical exigencies of teaching? More attention to contexts would help shift the problem of empowerment from dualisms of power/powerlessness, and dominant/subordinate, that is, from purely oppositional stances, to a problem of multiplicity and contradiction. It may be helpful to think of social actors negotiating actions within particular contexts. I hasten to add here that I am not advocating a notion of context as simply a pseudonym/synonym for the present or the immediate. Rather I would argue that context must be conceived as filled with social actors whose personal and group histories position them as subjects immersed in social patterns. Thus, contexts for the work of empowerment need to be defined historically and politically with acknowledgement of the unique struggles that characterize the exercise of power at the micro levels.

---

## Unreflexive Use

My major concern about the politics of empowerment within discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy stems from conceptions of the agent of empowerment. Having established that the agent of empowerment is usually the teacher, and that the subject (or object) of empowerment is Others, a distinction is immediately set up between "us" and "them." Even if some teachers attempted to empower other teachers, the distinction remains

between those who aim to empower and those who are to be empowered. As a given in any relation which aims at empowerment, the agent becomes problematic when the us/them relationship is conceived as requiring a focus only on "them." When the agent of empowerment assumes to be already empowered, and so apart from those who are to be empowered, arrogance can underlie claims of "what we can do for you." This danger is apparent both in the work of the teacher who is to empower students and in the work of the academic whose discourse is purportedly empowering for the teachers (and others).

In the focus on Others there is a danger of forgetting to examine one's own (or one's group's) implication in the conditions one seeks to affect. Consider, for example, the following statement by Giroux (1988):

Teachers' work has to be analyzed in terms of its social and political function within particular "regimes of truth." That is, teachers can no longer deceive themselves into believing they are serving on behalf of truth when, in fact, they are deeply involved in battles "about the status of truth and the political role it plays." (p. 212)

In his insistence that teachers are intellectuals who need to be conscious of the contradictory effects of their work, it seems Giroux has ignored the possibility that his own position as an intellectual is also vulnerable as a "regime of truth." It is possible that he has misread Foucault in a way which costs him his critical openness (Bové, 1988). His insight on teachers seems to be his oversight when it comes to his own work. In the (well-intentioned) focus on empowering others there is a danger of overlooking the reflexivity which, rhetorically,<sup>3</sup> is considered integral to critical practice.

Moreover, setting oneself apart as teacher/intellectual/leader can easily foster an arrogance which assumes to know what empowerment means for teachers or students. And it assumes that "we can do for you." Bové (1986) puts it like this:

Leading intellectuals tend to assume responsibility for imagining alternatives and do so within a set of discourses and institutions burdened genealogically by multifaceted complicities with power that make them dangerous to people. As agencies of these discourses that greatly affect the lives of people one might say leading intellec-

tuals are a tool of oppression and most so precisely when they arrogate the right and power to judge and imagine efficacious alternatives--a process that we might suspect, sustains leading intellectuals at the expense of others. (p.227)

Rather than making pronouncements about what we can do, we need to ask "what can we do for you?"

If empowerment is constructed as the exercise of power in an attempt to help others to exercise power (rather than as the giving of power), we confront the contradictory effects of the exercise of power and must be more humble and reflexive in our claims. It is not at all clear we can do anything. For example, in my own practice as a teacher educator, I have encouraged student teachers to question practices of the education systems in which they will work and have exposed them to ideas of collective political action as having potential for social change. These efforts were aimed at "empowering" student teachers as they enter the salaried workforce. But my teaching will not/has not always had the effects I hoped it would (Gore, 1990; Gore & Zeichner, 1990). Some students decided that they couldn't bear to teach in such an oppressive system and never entered teaching. Some taught for only a brief time and then pursued alternative careers. Some have struggled to find peers with whom to engage in "collective political action" and, in "going it alone," have been ostracized within their schools and have risked job security. Others have accepted "the way things are."

In attempts to empower others we need to acknowledge that our agency has limits, that we might "get it wrong" in assuming we know what would be empowering for others, and that no matter what our aims or how we go about "empowering," our efforts will be partial and inconsistent.

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## Regimes of Truth

Each of the concerns about empowerment I have articulated above--an overly optimistic view of agency, a tendency to overlook context, an overly simplistic conception of power as property, the theoretical pronouncement of discourses as liberatory, a lack of reflexivity--can be illuminated through Michel Foucault's notion of "regimes of truth."

In pointing to the nexus of power and knowledge, regime of truth highlights the potential dangers and normalizing tendencies of all discourses, including those which aim to liberate. Foucault (1983) said: "My point is not

that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous" (p.231). Foucault (1980) explains "regime of truth" as follows: "'Truth' is linked in circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (p.133), and

Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p.131)

McLaren and Giroux, from whose work I have drawn many of my examples thus far, both employ the concept "regime of truth" to talk about the nexus of power and knowledge. My interpretation of the concept differs, however, in my application of it to more than one "society" (the "dominant" society) with a single regime. My use allows us to posit that, for example, feminism may have its own power-knowledge nexus which, in particular contexts or at particular historical moments, will operate in ways which are oppressive and repressive to people within and/or outside of that "society." As evidence, consider the anger many women of color have expressed at the alienation and marginalization they felt from what developed as a primarily white, middle class form of feminism in the academy (e.g., Hooks, 1984; Spelman, 1988). Similarly, I argue, contemporary discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy have their own politics of truth--systems of power which produce and sustain truth and effects of power which the discourses induce and by which the discourses are extended--at the same time as they are positioned within the larger regime of our present.

Foucault (1983) and Feher (1987) have articulated points of focus that can be used as a methodological guide for the study of regimes of truth.<sup>4</sup> The framework articulates two sets of questions or concerns central to Foucault's work: the first identifies the political aspects of the regime, focussing on the relations of power, what goes on between people; the second identifies the ethical aspects of the regime, the relation to one's self and the way that relation shifts. The political aspects of the regime can be identified through a study of the system of differentiations made, the functions and objectives of those differentiations (or relations of power), the specific techniques and practices which actualize the relations of power, the institu-

tions which integrate these practices, and the formation of knowledge which describes the regime. The ethical component of the regime can be identified by studying the aspects of the self or body that are considered problematic or in need of disciplining in any given regime, in the name of what the self is disciplined or styled, the specific techniques that are developed to achieve a particular self-styling, toward what goal. The ethical "is at once intertwined with and autonomous to the political.... The two...work together.... The ethical affects the mechanisms of power as much as the political, and there is as much resistance in the political as there is in the ethical" (Feher, 1987, p.165).

It is not within the scope of this paper to attempt a detailed analysis of regimes of truth in critical and feminist pedagogy, nor it is my aim. Rather, I elaborate central features of regimes of truth in critical and feminist pedagogy which might help us to understand their construction of empowerment rhetoric and practices. In particular, I focus on some of the differentiations made, the institutions involved, and the relations to "self" articulated within the discourses. I emphasize that these aspects of the regime are connected to each other and separated here for purposes of analysis and clarity.

In the Neo-Marxist discourses of critical pedagogy there has been a self-proclaimed shift from "a language of critique" to "a language of possibility" (e.g., Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Simon, 1987). This differentiation is connected with the shift from conceptions of power as repressive to power as productive, and with a shift from an emphasis on ideology and structure to an emphasis on agency. Resistance theories can be located at the transition between critique and possibility. Willis' (1977) study, for example, pointed to a productive aspect of power but concluded with an elucidation of the oppressive structures which kept "the lads" in their class position. "Empowerment" has been constructed in ways that take the productive moment of power further, and so go "beyond resistance." This movement to a language of possibility is part of a general shift in critical educational discourse toward acknowledging that education has played a role in social movement and not just in social reproduction (Wexler, 1987). There has been movement beyond encouraging teachers to recognize the structural constraints under which they work to having them also acknowledge "the potential inherent in teaching for transformative and political work" (Weiler, 1988, p.52). The strong sense of agency found in empowerment rhetoric (particularly in critical pedagogy) can be connected to the language of possibility in which it is embedded.

Despite this move to power as productive, the Neo-Marxist roots of the discourses perhaps account for the retention of a notion of power as property which still pervades the rhetoric of critical pedagogy. In its "vulgar" form, the Neo-Marxist conception of power is clearly encapsulated in the following passage from Burbules' (1986) "A Theory of Power in Education":

In order to identify power relations in schools, we have to begin with the questions Where are the conflicts of interest? Where are the zero-sum games? In principle, education need not involve power relations at all; the learning of one student does not necessarily entail the disadvantaging of another. In principle, teachers can function as legitimate authorities, not as authoritarian masters. In principle, schools can educate and...minimize power relations and promote the basis for informed, consensual, and egalitarian human relations. (p.109)

While Giroux and McLaren might argue with Burbules' theory, traces of power as property can still be found in their work; for example, critical pedagogy retains dualisms of the dominant and subordinate, the oppressed and the privileged, in which power is located in the hands of the dominant and the privileged.

Likewise, in feminist pedagogy conceptions of power as property remain. For example, Clare Bright (1987) says:

Discussion of the student/teacher relationship must include a frank look at the power of the teacher. Feminists have often avoided the topic of power, preferring structures and situations where power is shared. However, the educational system is not an egalitarian one, and regardless of the extent to which a teacher tries to minimize her power, it can not be completely given away. (p.98)

In as much as feminism seeks to change "patriarchal structures" and "existing power relations between men and women" (Weedon, 1987), notions of power as property and power as productive inhere and are carried into the discourses of feminist pedagogy. "A view of power as creative community energy would suggest that strategies be developed to counteract unequal power arrangements. Such strategies recognize the potentiality for changing traditional unequal relationships. Our classrooms need not always reflect an equality of power, but they must reflect movement in that direction" (Shrewsbury, 1987, p.8).

When we consider the specific practices that are to empower we

confront what Michael Apple (1988) has discussed as a paradox in the democratic call for social change from "the ground up" and the need to offer possibilities or models from which people can act. This paradox helps us to understand the tendency toward abstract and decontextualized (at the micro levels) claims for empowerment. In the attempt not to impose an agenda on others, critical (and, to a lesser extent, some feminist) pedagogy discourses have opted instead for rather abstract theories of empowerment. And yet, they have imposed a requirement on teachers to do the work of empowering, to be the agents of empowerment, without providing much in the way of tangible guidance for that work. An exception is the recent feminist poststructuralist attention to pedagogy which situates itself in particular contexts but has also begun to raise questions about the possibility of empowering (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Gardner, Dean & McKaig, 1989; Lewis, 1989; Mahony, 1988)--questions that point to multiplicity, contradiction, and partial-ness.

The institutional location of much of the critical and feminist pedagogy discourse in an academy which rewards the development of theory over struggles to teach can account for some of the theoretical pronouncement and inattention to context which I have been discussing. As part of academic discourses, the constructions of empowerment discussed in this paper often reveal a "will to knowledge," characteristic of much intellectual work, that is so strong that the need, desire, or willingness to question one's own work is lost in the desire to believe that one has found "truth," that one is "right." This aspect of the regime of truth is manifested (and problematic) in critical and feminist pedagogy discourses of empowerment by a tendency to present the discourses in a fixed, final, "founded" form which "protects them from rethinking and change. It turns what was once 'critical' in their work into a kind of norm or law--a final truth, a final emancipation. For Foucault that is just what critical 'truth' cannot be" (Rajchman, 1985, p.93).

Taubman (1986) makes this point in his review of *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching* claiming it is "informed by essentialist and separatist arguments and assumptions." "Therein," he says, "lies the danger of a feminist pedagogy. The old dualities are preserved. The origin of truth is found in anatomy. ...Feminist pedagogy loses its usefulness to the extent that it sees itself as synonymous with good teaching, having an exclusive claim on good teaching... It loses its force to the extent that it locates the origin and horizon of pedagogy in and on the bodies of women" (p.93). These essentializing tendencies might be accounted for by the emergence of much feminist pedagogy from liberal and radical feminist traditions, both of which "attempt to define women's nature once and for all" (Weedon, 1987, p.135). Similarly, the connection of critical pedagogy to Neo-Marxism might account for its totalizing tendencies whereby dominant discourses are bad and must be overturned and oppositional discourses are liberatory.

The will to knowledge of much academic work also helps us under-



stand the lack of reflexivity which is a danger in the use of empowerment rhetoric in some of these discourses. A more detailed attempt to map out the regimes of truth of critical and feminist pedagogy<sup>5</sup> (Gore 1989b) reveals a tendency to neglect the ethical<sup>6</sup>--one's relation to oneself. That is, these discourses rarely address ways in which teachers, students, or the theorists themselves need to style or discipline their gestures, postures, or attitudes. The rhetoric is of freedom, not of control. And yet, the discourses have the effect of disciplining teachers to practice critical and feminist pedagogies. This neglect of the ethical brings us full circle to the institutions which integrate critical and feminist discourses, primarily universities, and to the differentiations made in the academy and within the discourses themselves. The focus is generally on the broader political questions of interests and institutions with, especially in some discourses of critical pedagogy, little attention to self. How then, does the rhetoric of empowerment connect with the practice of pedagogy?

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## **Pedagogy and Empowerment**

To understand the relation of pedagogy to empowerment in these discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy, I want to highlight two aspects of the preceding analysis. First, my analysis of presuppositions points to a general congruence between the two enterprises of pedagogy and empowerment. In very general terms, pedagogy seems to involve a teacher (an agent) who "gives" knowledge, responsibility, and more (as property) to students, and aims to produce a particular conception of the educated student (a vision, a desired end state); that is, pedagogy seems to hold the same presuppositions as empowerment. It is not surprising then that it is the critical and feminist discourses which claim a focus on pedagogy that also emphasize empowerment.

Moreover, constructions of critical and feminist pedagogies and of empowerment have both occurred within discourses that have gone beyond a conception of power as primarily repressive: empowerment suggests the productive capacity of power (while frequently posing it in opposition to power as domination and so maintaining the dichotomy); critical and feminist pedagogy come out of a history of "progressive" schooling in which instead of controlling/disciplining/constraining learners, the teacher was to use her or his authority to facilitate/to empower.

While the congruence of empowerment and critical and feminist pedagogies can be understood, it remains to be seen whether they can be actualized as conceived. That is, while the desire may be to move from a

conception of power as repression to em-power-ment (in a dichotomous fashion with great optimism and human agency), the institutional location (context, again) of much pedagogical practice may militate against it. The pedagogical relation of teacher to students is, at some fundamental level, one in which the teacher is able to exercise power in ways unavailable to students. Teaching remains, to some extent, telling, and the active attempt to influence.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Foucault (1977) and others (e.g., Walkerdine, 1985, 1986; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989) have argued about disciplinary power, practices which decrease overt regulation can increase surveillance and regulation through covert and more dangerous means. These conditions suggest that attempts to "give up power" and "share power" in the name of empowerment might be misdirected. Rather, the energies of those of us who advocate critical and feminist pedagogies might be better directed at seeking ways to exercise power toward the fulfillment of our espoused aims, ways that include humility, skepticism, and self-criticism.

Second, my reconstruction (following Foucault) of empowerment as the exercise of power in an attempt to help others to exercise power, suggests that empowerment must occur in sites of practice. Indeed, if pedagogy is conceived as the process of knowledge production (Lusted, 1986), a meaning consistent with much critical and feminist work that tends to deny constructions of pedagogy as "instruction," then we can argue that empowerment must be pedagogical--a process of knowledge production. Of course, the work of theorizing can certainly be pedagogical to the degree that we can identify processes of knowledge production. But when we consider the rhetoric of much of this work to be for the empowerment of teachers and students as teachers and students and as "critical citizens" (critical pedagogy) or women (feminist pedagogy), while the primary site of knowledge production is the university, we can better understand why these discourses have seemed to some critics to be rather ineffectual. For example, Giroux's work has certainly been pedagogical and empowering for many of us in the academic field. Critiques of his work for the inaccessibility of its language (e.g., Schrag, 1988; Miedema, 1987) point out that his work may not have been as pedagogical or empowering at the ostensibly targeted sites of school and classroom. Of course, we need to take these criticisms cautiously, given that they are other academic articulations, just as my own critique must be positioned within the academic context of its construction.

Nevertheless, the argument that empowerment must be linked to pedagogical practice reiterates and strengthens two threads of this paper: first, discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy need to pay much closer attention to the contexts in which they aim to empower; second, they need to provide better guidance for the actions of the teachers they hope to empower or they hope will empower students. This is not to suggest that detailed prescriptions for practice should, or even could, be given. But if teachers are to exercise

power in an attempt to help their students exercise power both in and outside of the classroom or, as McLaren (1989) put it, "in the classroom and in the streets," then teachers need some contextualized guidance as to ways in which they might proceed. I am fully aware that this paper does not directly assist with the task of providing such contextualized guidance. My purpose here was limited to an elaboration of concerns with constructions of empowerment as a precursor to such a task for my own work in teacher education and, hopefully, for the work of others within the critical and feminist traditions.

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## Conclusion

None of this discussion of shortcomings or power or regimes of truth is to say that the impulse to empower groups who have historically been oppressed is bad or wrong, or that academics should divorce themselves from struggles that are not perceived to be immediately their own. On the contrary, I believe academics must continue the kinds of political struggles which are the concern of critical and feminist pedagogies, but should do so while constantly questioning the "truth" of their/our own thought and selves. Of course, my own thoughts presented here must also be questioned. They represent a moment in my ongoing struggle to understand and practice pedagogies informed by the feminist and critical traditions.

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate ways in which (my interpretations of) Foucault's analyses of power and intellectual work are useful for this endeavor. Foucault's rejection of conceptions of power as property points to a rethinking of empowerment as the exercise of power in an attempt to help others to exercise power. And, in the emphasis on power as action, Foucault's work demands greater attention to the contexts in which empowerment is advocated and/or attempted. Furthermore, Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge as connected through regimes of truth, calls for greater reflexivity and acknowledgement of the limitations of what "we" can do for "you."

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1. See Gore (1989a) for an elaboration of the construction of empowerment within conservative and liberal humanist discourses.
2. See Jaggard (1983) and Weedon (1987) for characterizations of the variety of stances within feminism. Also see Acker (1987) for a consideration of the educational applications of the various theoretical frameworks.
3. Consider, for example, McLaren's (1989) statement cited earlier in this paper that critical discourses are "self-critical."
4. I thank Elizabeth Ellsworth for introducing me to Feher's (1987) work and for suggesting its relevance as a methodology for my work on critical and feminist pedagogies.
5. See Gore (1989b) for an attempt to map out the regimes of truth in critical and feminist pedagogy around issues of authority.
6. This sense in which Foucault uses "ethical" is not to be confused with the commonsense use of the term which often conflates ethics with morality.
7. I thank Michael Apple for articulating this insight during a recent conversation.

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