Empirical Manifestations of Power among Adult Learners in Online Discussions

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This study examined the nature of power manifestations in a specific online learning setting. The two online classes selected for this study were Master's level courses in a professional school at a large state university in the United States. A total of 1340 postings were made in the two classes over the span of the semester. To test the research question, frequency analysis and the Mann-Whitney U test were conducted, using gender and race as the independent variables. The results of the study suggest the possibility that the online discussion environment attenuates the power of gender-based privilege and perhaps undercuts race privilege, even though there was an element of inequality based on power between the racial groups in an indication of power manifestations.

Key words: manifestations of power, critical discourse analysis, powerful/powerless language

Introduction

Power is a key element in all human interactions. Tisdell (1993) points to the structural inequality that exists in society—the power disparity between racial minorities and the white majority, the poor and the wealthy, the undereducated and the educated, and women and men—and how these power relations are reproduced and maintained through the educational process. Cunningham (2000) argues that "much of the field of adult education's rhetoric centers on the learners, as if the learners are disembodied creatures and as if the social context, the social structures, and the social class in which we all exist do not affect the process of education" (p. 573). Brookfield (2000) notes that power is ubiquitous in adult classrooms, inscribed in the practices and processes that define the field. He maintains that "when

we become aware of the pervasiveness of power, we begin to notice the oppressive dimensions to experiential practices that we had thought were neutral or even benevolent" (p. 40). Discussion is usually considered to be a powerful tool for the development of pedagogic skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and reflection as well as for the improvement of democratic communication. Based on his experience as a learner or a facilitator in a discussion group, Brookfield (2001) underscores his theory that unless adult educators create a space for those voices that would otherwise be excluded by default, discussion reproduces structures of inequity based on race, class, and gender that exist in the wider society. As Wilson and Cervero (2001) point out, the systems of power that structure all action in the world are an inescapable facet of social reality and usually asymmetrical in that they privilege some people and disadvantage others. There is a strong need to illuminate the unequal power relations between those people who benefit from privilege and those who do not.

Although there is a body of literature that discusses the

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types of interaction or the factors influencing interaction in online discussions for adult learners, there has been a lack of research that specifically examines the nature of power relations among adult learners in online discussions. The present study employed critical discourse analysis as a methodological approach in an attempt to understand the nature of power relationships that occurred in the written discourse of two online graduate courses. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a study dealing with the nature of power relationships in a specific online learning setting. This research was guided by the following research questions: (1) To what extent are manifestations of power and powerlessness present in an online classroom? (2) To what extent can manifestations of power and powerlessness be explained by the personal characteristics of students?

Power Manifestations in Discussions

In considering the ways in which discussion mores represent or challenge dominant cultural values, Brookfield (2001) suggests three theoretical perspectives-Marxist structural analysis, resistance theory, and post-structuralism-as lenses for a power analysis of classroom discussion. He notes that the discussion facilitators should intervene to prevent the patterns of inequity present in the wider society from reproducing themselves automatically in the classroom.

Jeris (2001) explored how time and space, significantly altered through electronic mediation, affect the power relations among adult graduate students who participated in an online course, providing the comparison of power relations within online and face-to-face classroom discussion through a case study. The author points out the power disparity that existed between women and men participating in online discussions, as illustrated by the following example:

…In relation to this comment, another student remarked, "I was so embarrassed by something stupid I said during my first MBA class that I made up my mind right then, I was not going to say another word. If it hadn't been for this class, I would have kept that promise." Several students wanted to know why this student decided what she said was stupid. She revealed

that her comment was declared to be "utterly ignorant" by a male classmate who was also a professional colleague in a more senior position (p. 4).

Tisdell (1993) examined how power relationships predominantly based on gender, but including race, class, and age, were manifested in a higher educational classroom of adult students through observations of classes taught by a male and a female professor, interviews, and document analysis. She observed several significant facts in terms of power relations: (1) the students who benefited from more interlocking systems of structural privilege tended to have more power in the classroom from the perspective of their peers than did the students who had less interlocking privilege, and these students tended to play a dominant role in the class; (2) the students contributed to reproducing structured power relations in their reification of patriarchal values; (3) the male professor tended to exert more control than the female professor; and (4) the middle-aged women with a stronger educational background tended to be more participatory, at least in classes where affective forms of knowledge were valued.

Grob, Meyers, and Schuh (1997) examined sex differences in powerful/powerless language, such as interruptions, disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions, in the small group context of a higher education classroom by juxtaposing two competing theoretical frameworks: "dual cultures" and "gender similarities." Their findings revealed that there were no significant differences between women and men in their use of interruptions, hedges, and tag questions, which supports the "gender similarities" approach to understanding sex differences rather than the dominant "dual cultures" approach for investigating sex differences. In other words, there was no evidence that men use more powerful language while women use powerless language.

Carli (1990) observed mixed-sex and same-sex dyads consisted of undergraduate students to examine effects of gender composition on language and of language on gender differences. Her findings indicated that (1) women were more tentative than men, but only in mixed-sex dyads; (2) women who spoke tentatively were more influential with men and less influential with women; (3) in same-sex dyads women were more likely than men to use intensifiers and verbal reinforcements, whereas no gender

differences emerged in mixed-sex dyads; and (4) men were equally influential whether they spoke assertively or tentatively.

Some studies have focused on gender differences in communication patterns in online discussions. McAllister and Ting (2001) explored gender differences in computer-mediated communication in Web-based college courses, analyzing the 456 discussion postings of 34 students in two online college courses. Each discussion posting was analyzed for seven variables: total comments, comment length, readability level, intended audience, purpose, references, and format. The findings of the study indicated that male and female discussion items differed significantly in the following ways; length, use of indicators to specify a particular reader, purpose, and the use of formal signature. However, male and female discussion items did not differ in frequency, readability, intended audience, or references to personal experience or outside sources.

In a similar vein, Fahy (2002) investigated gender-related communications differences in the use of linguistic qualifiers (e.g., I think, may/might, often, perhaps) and intensifiers (e.g., always, certainly, of course, only, very) in a computer conference by examining the accompanying transcript of 356 student postings. The results of the study suggest a tendency for women to use more of the forms thought likely to sustain dialogue (qualifiers, conditional and parenthetic statements, and personal pronouns), while men's postings generally contained fewer qualifiers and more intensifiers. Even though this study tested the hypothesis that men's and women's preferred online interaction styles would differ in regard to their use of qualifiers and intensifiers, the study provides a significant implication for this study because the difference test in gender in the use of linguistic qualifiers and intensifiers is very similar to my approach of using the difference test in gender and race groups in the use of powerful/powerless language.

Although all of above studies contributes to the understanding of power in online learning, it is clear that additional work is needed if we are to understand power dynamics in this rapidly growing educational format. This study explored the ways in which power and privilege are expressed in online discussions in higher education.

Data Coding: Critical Discourse Analysis

This study explored the extent to which the structural power inequities that exist in society are reproduced in an online classroom of adult graduate students. The researcher focused primarily on power relationships based on gender, but also explored potential power inequality related to race.

Discussions in online learning settings are very different from those in a face-to-face environment. Specifically, group interactions are difficult and complex in an online environment where a clear sense of personal presence is difficult to maintain (Williams, Watkins, Daley, Courtenay, Davis, & Dymock, 2001). Accordingly, we can assume that power relations among participants in an online learning environment reveal different aspects than face-to-face classroom discussions. That is because social cues such as eye contact, body language, facial expression, and voice tones are totally absent in the online discussion environment. More often than not, power relations among people are likely to appear with those cues in face-to-face classroom discussions. However, in online discussions, written language alone is the most important factor that can uncover the power relations among people.

In this study, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as a methodological approach for data coding. CDA is a type of discourse analysis research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (van Dijk, 1998). Furthermore, van Dijk asserts that effective research using CDA has four key characteristics: (1) it focuses primarily on social problems and political issues, rather than on current paradigms and fashions; (2) it employs a multidisciplinary approach to understanding social problems; (3) rather than merely describing discourse structures, it attempts to explain them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure; and (4) it focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of power and dominance in society.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) summarize the primary tenets of CDA: (1) CDA addresses social problems; (2) power relations are discursive; (3) discourse constitutes society and culture; (4) discourse does ideological work; (5) discourse is historical; (6) the link between text and society is mediated; (7) discourse analysis is interpretative and

explanatory; and (8) discourse is a form of social action. Critical discourse analysis focuses on the role of discursive activity in constituting and sustaining unequal power relations. In a similar vein, van Dijk (1996) articulates the elucidation of the relationships between discourse and social power as one of the crucial tasks of CDA. In short, he maintains that "CDA should describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced, or legitimized by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions" (p. 84).

Dellinger (1995) states that socially situated speakers and writers produce texts and the relationships of participants in producing texts are not always equal; there is a range from complete solidarity to complete inequality. He stresses that meanings arise through interaction between readers and receivers, and in most interactions, users of language bring with them different dispositions toward language, which are closely related to social positionings. In a similar vein, Fairclough (1995) underscores the notion that the analysis of texts should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutions and discoursal practices within which texts are embedded. As Kaplan (cited in Dellinger, 1995) notes, the text is multi-dimensionally structured and layered like a sheet of thick plywood consisting of many thin sheets lying at different angles to each other.

Research Participants and Data Collection

The two online classes selected for this study, "A" and "B", using a learning management system (LMS) of WebCT, were Master's level courses in a professional school at a large state university in the United States. The same instructor taught both online classes. In addition, the web-sites, instructional materials, and learning activities for the two courses were identical. The graduate students enrolled in the two classes consisted of 10 males and 31 females. All but two of the students were part-time students who had full-time jobs. Twenty-nine of the students were Caucasian, ten were African-American, and one was of unknown race. Although precise age data were unavailable, it is known that the students' ages ranged from the mid-20s to mid-50s. Based on their short biographies, it was clear that the students knew each other before the class began; some students had included photographs with their biographies, and these were posted online.

The online course contained 10 units related to the concepts of educational research and the course itself was designed to enhance learners' understanding of educational research and to improve their ability to comprehend and use research reports. An emphasis was placed on the fundamental logic of research, the common types of educational research, and the major elements of each type. The course employed a variety of learning formats, all built around a textbook used for the course: independent reading of the text, supplementary audio "lecturettes" to facilitate learners' reading and studying, small group discussions, questions and answers, and article critiques.

Each class employed 3 mixed-sex small group discussions in each of the 10 learning units. More specifically, for each learning unit, the instructor provided discussion questions or set a discussion task. Each member of the group was required to make at least two "substantive contributions" to the discussion of each unit. The instructor didn't participate in the small group discussions, believing that his participation could negatively affect the level of student problem-solving. However, in 2 of the 10 units, content area experts joined the online discussions.

Substantive contributions were defined as having three major characteristics: (1) the contribution must relate either to the discussion task the instructor set or to the comments made by other group members, (2) it must be well thought-out and well crafted, and (3) it must be at least two sentences in length. Each discussion was time-bound; there was a tightly controlled time period during which students must make their contributions. The total span of the discussion activity during the first through eighth units was one week; for the final two sessions, the discussion was two weeks in duration. Ultimately, there were a total of 1340 postings made in the two classes over the span of the semester.

The data consisted of examining the 1340 postings for the two classes—all of which were converted into electronic files (PDF) —and coding them for these and other indicators of power/powerlessness. Coding was done on a passage-by-passage basis. In addition, it was not felt that there was a need to check reliability because the powerful/powerless languages of interest were relatively unambiguous and the words/phrases found in the previous studies were followed.

Conceptualizing Power in Online Discussions

Online discussions are different from face-to-face discussions in several significant ways. Certain behaviors that are critical to a complete understanding of communication are unavailable. Body language, tone of voice, volume, and accents are all missing from the discourse. These are replaced by other considerations not available in face-to-face discussions, such as font, type size, and punctuation.

I needed a way to conceptualize how power manifests itself in text-based, online discussion. After experimenting with numerous possible measures, I ultimately settled on five variables (see Table 1) as indicators of power/powerlessness in online communication.

Indicators of Power: Verbosity, Postings, Length of Comments, and Citation by Others

Dovidio, Ellyson, Keating, Heltman, and Brown (1988) found that high status or high dominance men and women display a greater amount of verbal and nonverbal power, as measured by the amount of time that subjects look at their partners while speaking and look away while listening. Tisdell (1993) points out that the students who benefited from more interlocking systems of structural privilege tended to have more power, playing the dominant role,

expressing itself through outspokenness in the class. In the current study, it was assumed that a person who has access to more words is more powerful than those who have fewer words; therefore, verbosity, postings, and length of comments are chosen as the indicators for the use of power language. Citation by others can be defined as the number of postings that receive responses from others. A person who has more citations by others is more powerful than those who have fewer citations by others (Jun & Park, 2003).

Indicators of Powerlessness: Self-Diminishment

Self-diminishment consists of disclaimers, tag-questions, and hedges. Disclaimers are expressions of uncertainty (e.g., "I guess," "I suppose," "I don't know much but," "I'm not an expert but"), indicating a lack of power (Carli, 1990). Tag-questions are shortened questions added to a declarative sentence. Grob, Meyers, and Schuh (1997) note that tag-questions are considered to be forms of powerless speech because they turn a declarative statement into a question, making the speaker appear more uncertain and less assertive. Carli (1990) found that women used more tag-questions than men in both same-sex and mixed-sex dyads. Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985) maintain that the more powerful person of either sex is, the more likely they are to interrupt and be more successful at it, whereas the less powerful person tends to use more tag

Table 1

Conceptualizing Power

Variable	Rationale	Operationalization
Verbosity	The more a person writes, the more s/he demands attention from the other learners.	Total number of words in transcript
Postings	The more times a person posts a message, the more times s/he demands the attention.	Total number of postings in the discussion bulletin board
Length of Comments	The longer each posting is, the more sustained attention demanded of other learners.	Total number of words/total number of postings
Citation by Others	The more times a person has her/his written words cited by others, the more times s/he demands attention.	Total number of postings that received responses from others
Self-Diminishment	The more times a person uses self-diminished written words, the less times s/he demands attention from the other learners.	(Self-diminished written words/total number of words)*1000

Note. Self-diminished written words consisted of disclaimers, tag-questions, and hedges.

questions. Finally, hedges can be defined as adverbs or adverb phrases that contain little or no meaning, convey moderation, or have no particular meaning at all (Grob, Meyers, & Schuh, 1997). Carli (1990) found that women used more hedges than men in both same-sex and mixed-sex dyads.

Table 2

List of All Words/Phrases Coded as Powerless Language

Disclaimers (N = 518)	Tag-Questions (N = 48)	Hedges (N = 1664)
I am a lot lost!	Am I really still foggy?	A bit
I'm (was) confused	Are we correct in how we understand this?	A little (bit)
I'm not sure/I'm unsure	Doesn't it?	A tad
I'm stuck here	Huh?	About
I (would) assume	Is that correct?	Almost
I consider	Is that right?	Anything like that
I don't (do not) know	Is this common?	Around
I don't see	Is this how you see it?	Could be
I don't understand	Is this true?	(Please) help!
I (also/do/just/still/want to/would) feel	Isn't it?	(In my) humble opinion
I (would) guess	Make sense?	Just my thought/a thought
I have no idea	So, what is the correct definition?	Kind of/sort of
I mean	(Am I) right?	Kinda
I suspect	Would that work?	Like
I am inclined to (I'd like to) think	(Am I) wrong?	(Un)likely
I want to make sure I understand this properly		Look like
I wonder (am wondering)		May (not)
It seems (does/would seem)		Maybe
		Might (not)
		More toward
		Most(ly)
		Otherwise
		Perhaps
		Pretty (much)
		Probably
		(Sometimes) seem (like)
		Seemingly
		Silly
		Slightly
		Something like (that)
		Somewhat
		Sound like
		That much
		Usually
		Whatever
		Would be
		You know

Table 2 presents a list of words/phrases coded in the three categories that are the indicators of powerless language use.

Data Analysis

In this study, discussion postings were analyzed and coded based on the technique of critical discourse analysis, closely keeping in mind the primary tenets of CDA. As Fairclough (1995) notes that there is no set procedure for doing discourse analysis, people approach it in different ways according to the specific nature of the project and their own views of discourse. Van Dijk (1993) also points out that critical discourse analysis is far from easy, requiring true multidisciplinarity and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society, and culture. Joyce (2001) stresses that by taking a position, researchers must be self-reflexive in terms of their interpretations and analyses and maintain some distance in order to avoid producing analyses that map directly onto their own personal beliefs.

Before testing the research questions, I checked for any violations of assumptions. To screen the data set for normality and outliers, I used DeCarlo's macro test. Based on the guideline that if any variables have values for g1 (measure of skewness) or g2 (measure of kurtosis) that are greater than |2.0|, then the variables are seriously non-normally distributed, I found that the variable of "postings" is seriously non-normally distributed with a very large kurtosis value of 2.74. The Mann-Whitney U test is the nonparametric substitute for the independent two samples t-test when the assumption of normality is not valid. To test

the research question, I conducted frequency analysis and the Mann-Whitney U test using SPSS 11.0, using gender and race as the independent variables. Descriptive statistics were generated for each variable: means, standard deviation, standard error, and min and max values.

In addition, to see if the measures used were valid, I conducted the Pearson correlation analysis. As indicated in Table 3, the powerful/powerless indicators of verbosity, postings, length of comments, and citations by others were highly correlated with each other, with correlations ranging from -.369 to .655. One exception was the correlation between the variables of length of comments and citation by others (.115), revealing that their correlation was insignificant or negatively correlated. The negative correlation value of -.369 between the two powerful indicators of postings and length of comments may come from adult learners' different strategies for manifesting power. While some adult learners manifested their power through "postings," others exposed power through the length of their comments. In short, the five variables chosen in this study were reasonable.

Findings

Findings Related to Research Question 1

Table 4 shows the items that account for over 5% in each powerless language category. The principle findings were:

- In the category of disclaimers, "I am inclined to (I'd like to) think" was the most prevalent, accounting for 441 of 959 observations (45.99%), followed by

Table 3

Correlations among the Five Indicators for Powerful/Powerless Language Use

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Verbosity	1.00				
(2) Postings	.608**	1.00			
(3) Length of comments	.466**	-.369**	1.00		
(4) Citation by others	.655**	.623**	.115	1.00	
(5) Self-diminishment	-.005	.225	-.320*	.256	1.00

Note. ** is significant at the .01 level; * is significant at the .05 level.

"It seems (does/would seem)" with 222 observations (23.15%). "I (would) guess" placed third with 71 observations (7.40%). "I (also/do/just/still/want to/would) feel" placed fourth with 66 observations (6.88%). The others disclaimers account for almost 16.58% of the total percentage, with 159 instances.

• In the category of tag-questions, "(Am I) right?" was the most frequently used, with 18 observations

(37.50%), followed by "Make sense?" with 13 observations (27.08%). The others tag-questions account for 35.42% of total percentage, with 17 instances.

• Finally, in the category of hedges, "May (not)" was the most-used hedge, with 417 observations (25.06%). "Might (not)," "Probably," and "Maybe" were the second, third, and fourth most used hedges

Table 4

Specific Indicators of Self-Diminishment in Online Discussions

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
Disclaimers		
I am inclined to (I''d like to) think	441	45.99
It seems (does/would seem)	222	23.15
I (would) guess	71	7.40
I (also/do/just/still/ want to/ would) feel	66	6.88
Others	159	16.58
Total	959	100.0
Tag-Questions		
(Am I) right?	18	37.50
Make sense?	13	27.08
Others	17	35.42
Total	48	100.0
Hedges		
May (not)	417	25.06
Might (not)	255	15.32
Probably	101	6.07
Maybe	99	5.95
Others	792	47.60
Total	1664	100.0

Table 5

Mean and (Standard Deviation) Powerful/Powerless Indicators for Gender and Race Groups

Power/Powerlessness Indicator	Full Sample (n=41)	Gender		Race	
		Male (n=10)	Female (n=31)	Black (n=11)	White (n=29)
Verbosity	3619.66 (1231.87)	3373.40 (1085.37)	3699.10 (1281.87)	3114.64 (867.66)	3783.17 (1321.92)
Postings	32.68 (11.54)	28.80 (5.20)	33.94 (12.76)	29.73 (10.35)	33.55 (12.07)
Length of Comments	115.04 (33.68)	116.28 (26.87)	114.63 (35.98)	109.93 (32.33)	117.12 (35.09)
Citation by Others	10.05 (6.25)	9.00 (5.37)	10.39 (6.55)	6.55 (4.55)	11.00 (6.19)
Self-Diminishment	18.00 (5.15)	16.72 (3.82)	18.42 (5.50)	17.39 (6.81)	18.11 (4.53)

with 255 (15.32%), 101 (6.07%), and 99 (5.95%) observations, respectively. The others hedges account for 47.60% of total percentage, with 792 frequencies.

Table 5 provides descriptive statistics of means and standard deviations for each variable according to gender and race groups. In the comparison of means of the male and the female groups, the female group that formed the majority in the current study had higher means than those of the male group, with the exception of the "length of comments" variable.

In the comparison of means of the African-American and Caucasian groups, the larger Caucasian group had higher means through all five indicators of powerful/ powerless language use than did the African-American group.

Findings Related to Research Question 2

As seen in Table 6, the results of the Mann-Whitney U test show that there were no statistically significant differences in the use of powerful and powerless languages between the male and the female groups through all five indicators of power and powerlessness at a significance level of .05.

Table 7 shows that there was only one significant difference in "citation by others" (z = -2.069, p = .039) out of the five indicators of powerful/powerless language use between the African-American and the Caucasian groups at a significance level of .05. This result means that the Caucasian group had more "citation by others," which is an indicator for powerful language use in the online class, than did the African-American group.

Table 6

Differences between the Male and the Female Groups on Powerful/Powerless Language Use

Powerful/Powerless Indicator	Male (n =10)		Female (n = 31)		Mann-Whitney U	Z	p
	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks			
Verbosity	18.90	189.00	21.68	672.00	134.00	-.638	.524
Postings	17.70	177.00	22.06	684.00	122.00	-1.004	.316
Length of comments	22.70	227.00	20.45	634.00	138.00	-.516	.606
Citation by others	18.90	189.00	21.68	672.00	134.00	-.640	.522
Self-diminishment	17.90	179.00	22.00	682.00	124.00	-.941	.347

Table 7

Differences between African-American and Caucasian Groups on the Use of Powerful/ Powerless Languages

Powerful/Powerless Indicator	African-American (n =11)		Caucasian (n = 29)		Mann-Whitney U	Z	p
	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks			
Verbosity	16.09	177.00	22.17	643.00	111.00	-1.469	.142
Postings	17.23	189.50	21.74	630.50	123.50	-1.092	.275
Length of comments	18.18	200.00	21.38	620.00	134.00	-.772	.440
Citation by others	14.32	157.50	22.84	662.50	91.50	-2.069	.039*
Self-diminishment	18.55	204.00	21.24	616.00	138.00	-.651	.515

Note. * is significant at the .05 level.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that there were no statistically significant differences in the use of powerful/powerless languages based on gender. This suggests that there are no notable differences with respect to how men and women use powerful/powerless language in online discussions—at least so far as such use is captured by the variables used in this study.

With respect to race, the results revealed a significant difference in "citations by others" between the African-American and the Caucasian groups (z = -2.069, p=.039) at the significance level of .05. The Caucasian group received more "citations by others," which is an indicator of powerful language. This result revealed that there was inequality in powerful/powerless language use between the African-American and the Caucasian groups, at least with respect to "citations by others."

The findings suggest the possibility that the online discussion environment attenuates the power of gender-based privilege and perhaps undercuts race privilege, even though there was a power inequality between the racial groups in one indicator of power manifestations, citation by others.

Both researchers and practitioners need to embrace the possibility that online learning contexts might fundamentally alter power dynamics of discussions by eliminating the impact of physical appearance, size, body language, and tone of voice. The two-dimensional, linear, asynchronous nature of online discussion offers a very real contrast to the three-dimensional, sometimes chaotic world of face-to-face discussion.

Although the above results do not exactly support previous findings that there were differences in powerful/ powerless language use in gender and race groups, we need to pay attention to interaction dynamics occurring among adult learners in online learning settings. Whether learners who are not members of the dominant group (or who are members of the dominant group) use powerful or powerless languages clearly depends on the institutional framework of the learning situation, on the topic of the class, and on the racial-ethnic mix of the learning group (Carli, 1990; Hart, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, unless adult educators create a space for those voices that would otherwise be excluded by default, discussion reproduces the structures of inequality based on race, class, and gender that exist in the wider society (Brookfield, 2001). Brookfield notes:

> The adult discussion leader cannot be a laissez-faire facilitator, exercising a minimum of control. Taking this stance only serves to allow patterns of inequity present in the wider society to reproduce themselves automatically in the classroom. Instead, the teacher must intervene to introduce a variety of practices to insure some sort of equity of participation (pp. 221-222).

Wilson and Cervero (2001), in citing Livingston (1983), contend that to practically confront the world of inequity, we need to understand the way it is, have a vision for what it should be, and have strategies for achieving our vision. They depict adult education as a site for the struggle for knowledge and power:

> The social, economic, political, cultural, racial, and gendered power relations which structure all action in the world are played out in adult education. These systems of power are an inescapable facet of social reality and almost always asymmetrical in that they privilege some people and disadvantage others. Regardless of its institutional and social location or the ideological character of its content, any policy, program, or practice of adult education represents this embeddedness in a structuring (but not pre-determined) social reality. In a real sense, the power relations that structure our lives together do not stop at the doors of our classrooms or institutions that provide adult education (p. 3).

At this point, adult educators should pay attention to the power inequalities that exist in adult education, as the philosophy of adult education encourages adult learners' democratic and equal participation in a variety of learning settings. Facilitators of online courses need to pay more attention to the learners who are not in the dominant group in order to ensure that their participation is acknowledged and to reduce their marginality. To do this, Brookfield (2001) suggests three steps:

- First, make sure that the group wrestles with creating a moral culture for discourse.
- Second, make sure that the group's discussion

experience is constantly monitored through a classroom assessment or action research.

- Third, exercise teacher power to deconstruct and challenge structural power relations that interfere in equal discussion and equal learning.

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