Editorial

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Empowerment through Teaching and Learning

Knowledge is power – Francis Bacon.

This editorial takes the concept of empowerment as the focal point and connecting issue between the three articles in this volume of ergo. Similar to other areas of social life, such as women's empowerment or the empowerment of indigenous peoples, there has been an increased interest in teacher and student/learner empowerment in higher education (Kimwarey et al., 2014). Education has long been seen a tool for achieving empowerment of individuals and to create social change (Shoh, 1998). So what is empowerment? As the term suggests, it is about the 'power' or capacity and authority of an individual, community or organisation to control decisions and social interactions to their own advantage and interests. Empowerment is a process of increasing the level of self-determination and autonomy of specific agents; and decreasing the level of dependency and discrimination of the agent. As Houser et al. (2009) state in regards to the empowerment of learners, the state of 'being empowered' is a result of intrinsic characteristics of the agent (here the learner), such as self-esteem, motivation, and competence, and external factors that enable empowerment (or empowering factors) such as an empowering teacher.

All three articles in this volume are about empowerment in some form or another. The article by Heath et al. about teaching sensitive material, is about the empowerment of teacher and student in a classroom where sensitive material is discussed.

As they state in the last sentence, "respectful teaching and learning about sensitive material can be transformative for both teachers and students." Teaching and learning about sensitive material, as the article argues, is an opportunity for the students to learn valuable skills for future professional practice and also for working through potential own trauma and experiences. The authors' teaching experiences about sensitive material provide, as one of the reviewers said, a model of "professional best practice." The gender of the authors suggests that the 'emotional labour' (a term often used in the article) of teaching sensitive topics remains with women. The gender dimension of teaching sensitive issues would make interesting future research. Are male teachers less skilled or committed to do this 'emotional labour; or do males in a classroom about sensitive material need different pedagogical and coping strategies?

The article by Li et al. about doing Honours, either full-time or part-time, while doing a medical degree show the power of gaining extra skills and with that empower the students who did the Honours degree. The study concluded that the Honours degrees was seen as worthwhile by all students for increasing their academic and research skills, and "increased student enthusiasm for research." An interesting factor for the positive experience of Honours students in medical studies, as stated by the research participants, was "supervisor support" throughout the program, highlighting that empowerment of (Honours) students

happens through empowering teachers/supervisors who are committed to the learning and success of their students.

Emery and Habel's article about the use of video games in indigenous and remote education, shows that the use of technology – video games- can be an empowering factor for teaching indigenous issues and to close, what they called, the "epistemological gap" about knowledge of indigenous issues in Australian society and also to "encourage dialogue between indigenous knowledge systems and more positivist, Western approaches to knowledge and learning". Game-based learning in indigenous education can clearly be an "empowerment strategy" for indigenous peoples, as they show through some examples from other parts of the world, and should be utilised in Australia. They argue that "Australia urgently needs video games" that bridge the gaps between the "two worlds" of non-indigenous and indigenous peoples. What is essential for indigenous empowerment is that indigenous peoples are co-creators of the video games. This co-creation gives indigenous peoples a voice; it gives them the power to represent themselves rather than being represented through videos constructed by non-Indigenous peoples and knowledge. It needs to be stressed, however, that indigenous disadvantage in Australia and the gap in well-being between White and Indigenous Australians cannot be simply closed through game based education about the central issues that separate White and Indigenous Australians ("Rather than persist with strategies that are proven not to work, we need a new approach."). We also need to be careful not to reinforce and reproduce the cultural stereotypes and colonial discourses on how Indigenous peoples are represented in the games that are meant to undermine the dominant discourses. This cannot just be done by the co-creation with indigenous peoples in game creation but requires more social inclusion and empowerment of Aborigines in societies and in Australian education.

All three articles point to the institutional responsibilities to empower teacher and students. Heath et al. clearly stress that is not just the committed and pedagogically and emotionally competent teacher which is required for classrooms with sensitive topics but that there is a "disciplinary and institutional responsibility" to help with teacher and student skills and welfare. Similarly, the article by Li et al. and Honours in medical courses, underline the need for medical schools to provide more information about these options for students and to maintain both full and part-time Honours studies because they are essential steps to create research oriented future practitioners. Emery and Habel emphasise that game based learning about indigenous issues and knowledge needs to be taken up by Western education. Empowerment in education, in short, needs to work through institutional changes and support. If teachers and students are not supported by their faculties and institutions to be and to become powerful teachers and learners, through technological, emotional and financial support, there will be no empowerment of teachers or learners.

Finally, the three articles are a strong reminder that committed, engaging, and resourceful teachers are, arguably, the most critical factor for empowering students. They set the course design, assessment structure, provide resources to engage and help students, and provide leadership and role models for how to deal with issues in life. They define how teaching sensitive material can be done sensitively so that the student can learn and grow from it (with the educators in Heath et al. as a shining example); they decide whether to use games and in what ways to bridge 'epistemological gaps' (Emery and Habel) not just between different knowledge systems but also between different learners with different social and cultural experiences. They shape the learning and research experiences of students at all levels of education (including Honours, as shown by Li et al.).

The empowered teacher, however, is under threat. Sadly, we seem to live in a higher education system in Australia where there is an increasing focus on student-centred learning and student empowerment with little concomitant emphasis and support for empowering teachers. Every moment of teaching and learning is an opportunity of empowerment for the teacher and learner; it is an opportunity to know yourself (to challenge your personal values, attitudes and beliefs) and grow as a person. It is a dialectical process between learners and teachers. Both learn from each other. A one-sided focus on student-centred or driven learning without care and support for the teachers cannot achieve the flexible, multiple skilled (including the skill of emotional intelligence), and empowered student and professional required in 21st century knowledge societies. Power to the teachers!

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