

Can we get wiser about power relating?

Stories of mutual constraint in institutional life

by Dr Alison Donaldson

“Across the UK, university lecture halls and seminar rooms have been silent as academic staff continue a wave of strikes. Taken at face value, the industrial action is a textbook case of bad industrial relations.

Lecturers have accepted relatively low pay and pretty poor working conditions in exchange for significant autonomy and relatively secure jobs and pensions. But over the past decade, without negotiation, every aspect of that deal has been eroded. Autonomy has given way to increased teaching responsibilities, larger classes, more time spent grading and heavier management duties. Job security has been reduced by eliminating departments and cutting research funding. Pensions are failing to deliver on their promise.

While university leaders have awarded themselves huge pay increases, they allowed academic pay and standards to decline steadily. Nobody should be surprised that trust has broken down.

But this strike reveals a management failure more powerful than these compounded sources of resentment. Under successive governments, students have been re-defined as customers. They are served, so to speak, by academic staff who work on the frontline of the main product: student experience. This has shifted strategic focus from the pursuit of knowledge to the pursuit of teaching scores and student survey results.”

Margaret Heffernan, Financial Times, 11th March 2018:
“Universities risk their reputation by failing to value teaching staff”

In June 2018, a group of 11 people gathered together for a conversation on the topic of “speaking truth to power”, convened by my friend and colleague John Higgins and me. Most of those in the room were or had been in senior positions at different UK universities, and on the afternoon of the gathering we heard some fascinating stories and anecdotes about power relations, the constraints that people experience in today’s academic environment, and what they have tried to do to have real conversations with people despite power imbalances.

This is my personal story of that conversation, including the period leading up to it and some further exchanges with those who took part. (Every individual except John and me has been disguised – along with their institutions.) In a nutshell, I conclude for now that, as long as two or more human beings are interacting, power relating never stops, so maybe we should all be educated about this complex subject from a relatively early age. I will start my story by going back to the genesis of the gathering.

1: HOW I GOT CAUGHT IN CROSSFIRE

One day in spring 2018, John and I were having a lively chat in a café, and I found myself suggesting that we might convene an informal conversation in the summer with a selected group of people on the topic of the book he was working on: “Speaking truth to power”.

As an independent writer, I am now more or less outside any formal hierarchy, yet as John and I planned the event, I quickly became embroiled in a dilemma that was all about power and constraint. The individuals we were planning to invite to the event were a mixture of lecturers, professors and senior managers we knew from five UK universities. We were keen to hear their personal stories about speaking truth to power, so we wanted them to feel free to talk openly and frankly.

But even as I was beginning to make my own invitations, I found myself caught in a struggle between rival factions at one of the institutions. One of the first people I invited had recently been promoted from running and teaching courses to managing a large department. I really wanted this person to be with us, because I knew she had an unusual perspective and thought-provoking stories to tell. But when I told her who else I was intending to invite, she said she wouldn't feel free to share her experiences with these individuals in the room. She perceived them as being fiercely oppositional towards senior management.

It quickly dawned on me that the hostility between certain managers and academics at this particular university was so strong that, if we invited people from both sides of the divide, there was a good chance that neither party would share anything personal with the other. I briefly considered simply inviting them all along anyway and watching what kind of fireworks might happen in the room! But then I reminded myself that I was looking to hear people's stories, not to mediate a conflict. After a brief phone call about this quandary, John and I decided to get around it by designing the gathering as a truly cross-university event, with only one, or maximum two, individuals from each university. We hoped this would allow people to feel free to speak relatively openly as well as learning something from the stories.

Slightly awkwardly for me, this meant going back to two people whom I had already invited, who happened to be members of the teaching staff from the same university as the senior manager mentioned earlier. I told them that I had got myself into a pickle, caught between hostile factions at their institution, and that there was definitely going to be a senior manager from the university present in our conversation circle. They both concurred that they too would feel inhibited to speak openly and would therefore almost certainly not want to take part on this occasion. I was somewhat relieved when both of them, without protest, agreed to remove the event from their no doubt packed calendars; I said that we might bring together another group at some time in the future and could invite them along to that.

The irony of my situation didn't escape me. I was already embroiled in power relations! Hindered in doing what I had originally imagined, I faced the

uncomfortable task of speaking frankly with both sides of the conflict to find a way forward, if possible, without endangering relationships. This required both tact and courage. I also realised that I was exercising a measure of control as one of the convenors. I'm not sure whether I made the "right" choices, but my actions almost certainly did influence the balance of viewpoints in the room on the day.

Thankfully, identifying the venue for the conversation proved to be an easier task. We chose a Friends Meeting House that I had used for workshops before, knowing that the Quakers are renowned for their history of pacifism and speaking truth to power (their founder George Fox is said by some to have coined the phrase).

2: THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

For many people, the phrase "speaking truth to power" calls to mind situations where they felt voiceless or angry. I can certainly recall occasions when I struggled to challenge a parent, a sibling, a teacher, a boss or a bully. The discussion reminded me, however, that it is also worth understanding the perspective of people who are themselves perceived as powerful, largely on account of their position in the hierarchy. Two of those present at our gathering, despite being on different sides of the management-academic divide, clearly recognised one another's experience. (I will reproduce several of the exchanges almost verbatim, as this will provide a much more lively account than if I were to attempt to summarise.)

"It was easier to speak up before I had responsibility"

Victoria (senior manager): "I think that power lies in different places ... I've only been in a leadership role for about a year and I've been interested in how silenced I have felt in this new position ... I found it much easier to speak up and give my opinion before I was in a position of power, so-called. Now, I'm very aware that already by walking in some rooms there's a kind of perceived power there."

Janet (professor): "I completely recognise what you're saying, in that, in the time since I was promoted, I've also come to appreciate that there is a different atmosphere in the room, especially with PhD students. You become a lot more self-conscious and aware of what you can and cannot say out loud."

Victoria and Janet both expanded on their experiences of promotion:

Victoria: "I said to a friend of mine who had become a senior manager at a large museum, 'What's your advice?' She said 'Don't become a wanker.' And I said 'Of course I won't do that.' And she said 'No, but other people will expect you to be that, so notice when that comes to you'."

"There's something about people's expectations of you," Victoria continued, "something about constantly being approached by people who don't know you. You're the boss and you're responsible for over 300 people ... I find that when people know me as a person I can get really good solutions, but

when people imagine that you just are embodying everything about the institution, that's much, much harder, because then there's a blaming there. Once you become the embodiment of the power of the institution, and not yourself, you have completely lost the relational, conversational, dialogic way forward that people really want ...

Some people that come to me have a request and I find it utterly reasonable, and I think 'thank goodness they came through my door, I'm now enlightened and together we've found a way forward'. Other people come to me and they leave and I just feel horrible and awful and they've had a go at me, and it was non-productive."

Janet related how she had never planned to apply for a professorship until she had a conversation with a colleague who was then a professor herself and later became a head of department. She was particularly struck by some words that this woman had come out with: "I can say this because I'm a Prof, and being a Prof means I have the power." Janet added that she felt unrespected by this person.

Janet: "That became the reason why I started thinking about promotion. In my own mind, it was purely to be able to counteract the other Prof who had the power, and I had that person in mind, purely. Which I think is astonishing. If people ask me how it feels to be a Prof, in my mind the only reason why I wanted to become a Prof was so that she wouldn't feel that she could walk on me ...

My story of becoming a professor is, I think, symptomatic of what's happening in the university. There is very much an us-and-them mentality, whereby you have academic staff on one side and you have management on the other. For people who go up the ranks, who go from being purely academics to becoming managers, it's a career path. There is a sense in which they're seen slightly, a little bit, as traitors. And that's not because you betray your profession by becoming a manager but because there is that antagonism, and that us-and-them mentality."

"I miss the conversations we used to have"

Another person at our gathering, Michael, had also been promoted recently. He noticed how conversations with one particular person changed when he was asked to become their line manager.

Michael (senior academic): "My boss said to me, would I have another member of staff reporting to me? This person knows that, come January, he'll be reporting to me, and I have noticed that the nature of the conversations that we have has started to change already. We often had discussions about research and we had a shared research interest. Since the letter has gone to him that I'm his boss from January, the conversation has changed, in the sense that it's almost a bit like show-and-tell. So he'll say 'I'm doing this, I've been asked to do a keynote speech here, I've been asked to do that', to justify himself. I don't feel I have the confidence, yet, to say 'Have we noticed what the nature of our conversation is?' I don't know what's going on in his mind. And in terms of 'speaking truth to power', who's got the power? I don't think necessarily I've got the power. Anyway, there's a confusion in my mind. And it's all

very micro-level, not at the big organisation level. It's about, how can I do my best? And how can I support him to get to where he wants to get to?"

Another person in our circle responded directly to Michael's story:

Sarah (masters programme director): "Personally, I would just say to him 'I wonder what it's like for you? I used to love our conversations. I've got the impression something is subtly shifting, and I wondered whether you feel that you need to behave differently to me now, or not? I've got the impression something's changing, and I miss the conversations we used to have.' That could be construed as 'stepping out of rank', for sure, but you're saying what your impression has been. And you could acknowledge that the relationship has changed."

Roy (Director of a PhD programme) emphasised that Michael's relationship with his new report has indeed changed, and then shared a comparable experience from his time in the military: "When I was promoted out from being 'one of the gang' to being a person that had a different set of responsibilities, what I was always hopeful for was, could I continue to have human conversations with people but realising that the role was different? Some people's job is to put themselves in harm's way and my job was to send them there. It isn't easy or straightforward but, when that had been acknowledged on both sides, that was a healthy relationship. If it broke down, if the mutuality broke down, it became very difficult."

Clearly, then, both position and perception (or imagination) can alter the conversations that are possible between people at different levels of the hierarchy. This is "positional power" at work.

Further hurdles to dialogue

The group conversation also exposed the crucial but fragile role of dialogue in organisational life. As we have seen, open conversation can be killed off by power relations and perceptions. And yet, paradoxically, frank dialogue may be precisely what is needed to allow people on different levels in a hierarchy to understand each other's perspective.

In my own research, I had so often heard about senior people preferring to stay behind their desk, or to talk amongst themselves, when they could be initiating informal conversations with those lower in the hierarchy. So I asked the group a question that may have sounded on the naive side (or so I thought as I was transcribing it) but was meant to point to this problem.

Me: "I think we understand people best when we have direct conversations with them. A technician at a university told me the other day that the Vice Chancellor used to drop in on the studio from time to time, but the climate has changed in recent years and this no longer happens. Please enlighten me, why don't senior managers simply go and talk to people?"

In response, Victoria put things in perspective by pointing out that her university is now a community of tens of thousands of people, including staff and students. This clearly makes it challenging for someone like the Vice Chancellor to engage directly with anything more than just a tiny proportion of the population.

A story of Sarah's suggested another hurdle that can impede informal conversations:

Sarah: "I was trying to change things in the Masters, and I thought 'The first thing I need to do is find out what my faculty thinks about what I propose to do.' So I talked to them each individually, including this chap who subsequently accused me of manipulating the conversation, saying 'I don't think this is democratic – we do things democratically and we talk about it in the meeting'. And I answered 'I wasn't trying to influence people. I was trying to get a sense of 'where are we?'. She added a further reflection: "Anybody can sabotage any gesture you are trying to make. They can impute dishonesty or wrong motives."

On another occasion, Sarah hit yet another barrier:

Sarah: "We had a new leader, a woman who did things quite differently, and I really liked what she was doing. I remember having tremendous trepidation on my way to see her to tell her 'I like what you're doing, I really hope you don't think I've come to kind of flatter you' (there was a procession of people coming to her office). ... I thought to myself 'I want you to know that I genuinely feel so pleased and so happy and so grateful for the way you have started to do things differently, and I would like you to know that but I don't really know how to say that in way that I feel safe that you won't read motives behind it that are not there'."

Janet: "I think it's a very interesting point, the example of flattery. If you want to express genuine praise, you have to take enormous care. Positive feedback should not be interpreted as flattery but the nature of the power differential translates it into that somehow."

Janet also noted some reservations about the use of the word "dialogue":

Janet: "The language of 'dialogue' and 'authenticity' can mask relations of power. It co-opts the authenticity of the person into whatever system, whatever is trying to regulate and constrain or direct what we do. We're obliged to be free. We're obliged to relate to power in a way that denies that that relationship is there."

3: ENCOURAGING HUMAN CONNECTION

If dialogue can become a casualty of dysfunctional power relating, what, if anything, can people do to approach power relations in a way that might encourage real contact between people and thus counteract an oppositional climate in hierarchical organisations? We heard some examples of people doing just that. One might think of these as "dialogical methods" or "relational methods. I noted five from our conversation.

1. Stepping out of rank from time to time (without denying power relations)

People in positions of authority often wish they could get other people to speak up and say what they really think. In the group, we discussed whether it is possible for those in authority to step out of rank, at least temporarily, in order to coax out those voices and have a real conversation. Keith told a story about encouraging students to speak up.

Keith (lecturer): “Last year I was doing a number of open days representing the department and speaking to an audience of prospective students and parents. It feels very false saying what the students’ experience is like at the university, because you actually don’t know what it’s like because you haven’t spoken to students about it! And so this year I said, well okay, I’m going to try and get my students together and try to hear about their experience. And as part of that I set up a reading group with one of the modules that I was teaching on, and got together a few students and tried to make it quite informal and so on and so forth. But still it was very difficult to get them to talk to me in a truthful sort of way, until the very, very last time that we met in term, where we went to a pub instead of the café, and that helped. And actually it was only at that point, after a considerable amount of time meeting together, that actually I began to get the truth of what their experience of the course was like. It took a lot of time to get down to their level and to feel like it was valuable on their part to be able to speak to me about things that they would never have spoken to me about in a different context ...

I was actually surprised that they thought the course was quite good. I was anticipating more a series of kind of complaints really.”

Keith later mentioned that there were just two students in the pub, and they were both relatively mature, probably about 23-24, and I asked what made him feel sure that these students were speaking truthfully.

Keith: “I think there’s that kind of rapport that you have with people, where you feel like they’re able to speak. It’s a good question, because with ‘speaking truth to power’, what does ‘truth’ mean? It’s about something resonating, I suppose, or maybe you feel that somebody else in the conversation crosses a threshold into talking about some things in a particular way that somehow overcomes some of that power balance between people.”

Marta (PhD researcher) added: “We always talk about ‘meeting people on their level’, but what does that actually mean? That means that you are acknowledging the privilege that you have in that situation and that means that you kind of, for a second, give up that privilege, put it aside and say ‘Look, I’m right there with you’.”

2. Finding conversation-friendly spaces

Victoria: “I think that the point Keith is making about where to have the conversations is really important ... There are set-ups and atmospheres and places that are conducive, aren’t there, to good conversations? And there are set-ups and atmospheres and places that are anti good conversations. And if you look at an

institution like our university, we're so pressed for space, we have one room for staff, and that's a board room, which is an instantly combative place to try and really listen to people."

Janet then brought up a possible complication with the "let's go to the pub" scenario. "At one institution I know of there was a high-profile scandal of sexual harassment. They've now become the light bearers of sexual harassment training for all staff and students, which includes the fact that staff are not supposed to go to the pub with their students. At one point we had a Head of Department who insisted that it was a duty of staff to be at the pub after work, because that was where all the business happens of course. But this clearly disadvantaged identifiable groups of people, such as those with kids."

Some years ago, one person in our circle had organised for a yurt (a kind of nomadic tent) to be pitched temporarily on her university campus as a space where staff and students could meet spontaneously or by arrangement. Inside, there were chairs and a wood burner and many people found the conversations very rich. This was a creative solution that was neither the office nor the pub.

3. Letting people know they've been heard

Victoria: "In university staff surveys, the majority of staff might say that they feel unheard and excluded from decision-making processes. How can we show people 'You are appreciated and you have been heard'? Because I think we sort of think that we are listening as a group of managers, but maybe people are feeling like they're not heard."

Her comment was prompted by a story that Michael had been telling about how, while a senior lecturer, he decided to speak up in a high-level meeting about something that was troubling him. He wasn't sure until much later, though, whether his words had made any difference:

Michael: "In order to get to know how the university works, I applied to go on one of the Boards. I thought I might find out what's going on and see the machinery behind it. I got elected (I was the only candidate!). At the time, the university was planning to have a large new development built, located next to our existing campus. From my previous employment, I know what projects are like and how they go wrong. On the Board I became concerned that the way we were talking about this new project was a bit Billy Graham-ish, by which I mean it was all 'fantastic and wonderful', and there wasn't any critical engagement with 'What are the real things that are going on here?'"

In telling this story, Michael pointed to the theme of inclusion and exclusion. He was aware, for example, that three of the senior leaders had all been in (private) conversations before the Board meeting he attended. So the conversation in the meeting was like a performance.

Michael: “When the next Board meeting was approaching, I said to my manager, ‘I’m worried about what’s going on. I think there’s an issue of risk that we seem unable to speak about ... How do you think I could speak, have my voice heard, about what I see as a difficulty in not being able to speak about this project?’ ...

At the next Board, this performance was happening again, and I said ‘Do you know, what I’ve noticed is that we’re not actually speaking about this project in a way that is truthful about the nature of the risk and the difficulty that we’re facing.’ And I gave some examples of the kinds of things that I would expect to see in a well-run project. At which point, a big hoo-ha went on and it destabilised this carefully choreographed performance. There was this Head of Strategy there and he got very, very anxious. I could tell there was this anaphylactic shock happening! So, before the Epi-Pen came out, I stopped! ...

“I spoke to my boss afterwards. He asked me in and said ‘By the way, Michael, come here, I want to show you an email. I’m going to send it to you, but I want you to see it.’ And it was about the conversation that we had had and about the ripples that had happened since. The Vice Chancellor had said afterwards ‘What Michael said, we need to think about this.’

What struck me was that, although I felt a sense of ejection coming out of the meeting, I did feel as if I had had my voice heard, but it was not allowed to be heard overtly, to say ‘This is a really good point.’ The performance had to happen ... Some months afterwards, I was thinking about going for a more senior position. I asked my boss and apparently what I had said at the Board had made an impact. It had some benefit for some. I’m sure to others – they now treat me as if I’m somebody to be very wary of. So I try not to say much in those meetings now.”

Jim (consultant): “Those kinds of performances don’t really allow open conversation, because that undoes that performance of power. Your voice did kind of get through beyond those performances on the backstage. But it wasn’t allowed to be seen.”

Victoria: “We mustn’t assume that power doesn’t want to hear what it is people have got to say. Sometimes the hearing happens in another place. You will get heard, but you won’t be in the room when you’re being heard. The loop isn’t finished – they haven’t gone back to you and said ‘Do you know what, thank you, we heard that and we’re now doing this.’ So I think sometimes we just miss that final stage.”

4. Responding to snipers

Sarah “However much you ask people ‘Please, please tell me what you think’, I’ve seen many people who much prefer to fold their arms and snipe and say ‘This consultation process is crap’.”

Victoria: “I’ve learnt over the years that there are some people, and they’re in the minority, who, whatever you do, they will snipe. Whatever you do, whether it’s in their benefit or not, they’re oppositional. So I have actually found huge relief in stopping trying to please them, because they make it their business to be

unpleasable. It's a minority but they are very powerful. You just have to understand it. They're pleasure is to be unpleased."

Marta: "Have you considered that these people are creating a space where they have the ability to be powerful, when in the main system there is just not even that possibility of power?"

Victoria: "I totally agree, and my approach to that would be to give someone more responsibility. If they say they don't want it, it's quite hard. If someone isn't engaged, my default position would be 'Okay, go and do that, have that money, have that responsibility, go and make that change.' But then some people still say to you 'No, I'm not doing that'."

5. Learning to communicate in a non-violent way

Victoria told a story that revealed something about how people make requests to those in top positions:

Victoria: "When I was in my new leadership role, we had some leadership training. There were 25 of us in the room. Part of that training was we all agreed as a group that we hadn't been properly listened to and there were lots of things we were cross about. And the promise on this one-day training course was that, at the end of the day, the Vice Chancellor would be coming into the room and 'this is your chance to speak'. In fact, one woman said 'I'm not afraid to speak truth to power.' And then a facilitator, it was genius, said 'Okay, you've got this set of requests and they're really reasonable, but there is an emotional antagonism in the way that you are articulating this. If we were to change the way that you speak, and if you want to get what you want, I suggest that you change the way that you present that to the Vice Chancellor.' And she offered a structure, and it was like magic. So the Vice Chancellor came in and we used the structure. The Vice Chancellor said 'Yes, thank you very much.'

Victoria added:

"It was a set of skills and an approach. It reminded me, it wasn't dissimilar to assertiveness training. 'This is the situation, this is how I feel, this is what I'd like to change, this is how I propose we change it, this is what it would cost.' It's just a non-violent, reasonable request. And it worked."

At the end of our discussion on "speaking truth to power", there did seem to be a consensus in the room that attending to the quality of conversations and relationships is essential to engaging constructively with power relations, and that there are some relevant methods or skills worth developing.

4: FURTHER CONVERSATIONS SPARKED BY THIS PIECE

One of my strongest principles as a writer has long been to give what I have written a “social life”. With this paper, I circulated an early draft to all those who had taken part in the earlier conversation, specifically requesting that they check their quotes and suggest what we might do with the write-up. This prompted some lively email discussions which are worth reproducing in part here, as they speak volumes about the power relationships not only between those who had been in the room, but also between them and me, as the person who took it upon themselves to write something about the whole experience.

Trepidation about wider circulation of the write-up

The first response came quickly; this person said she liked the piece and had just one small correction. Then, to my slight dismay, the next person requested that we do not share the paper beyond the group. She wrote: “Apologies if that seems over-cautious but we are operating in harsh times that I fear are about to get harsher.” I resisted the temptation to reply instantly and instead waited to see what others had to say. It came as a relief when someone else wrote back lamenting how drab and lifeless academic writing tends to become once all the powerful examples of the writer’s experience of relationships at work have been sanitised or removed. Soon after these exchanges, John jumped in helpfully by circulating an anonymised version of the paper while keeping all the real life stories. This seemed to work.

Acknowledging the role of identity in power relating

Another email exchange – about *the role of identity in power relating* – emerged after I had emailed each person individually to remind them of my request for comments. In this case, the person, who described herself as a “young black woman”, sent me and John some very thoughtful reflections on her experience of the session. She had enjoyed it but had felt an outsider, and had been aware of “a great irony in attempting to speak truth to power in a room of such powerful people.” The first thing that had struck her on entering the room was the demographic of those present. She described them as “able-bodied, cis-gendered, predominantly white and middle-aged people so notably different from the demographic of people I interact with in my day to day life.”

She then went on to make what seemed to me a crucial point, namely that, in university life, “we are having two separate but interconnected conversations – one on the increasingly service-orientated model of higher education and the other on diversity in education”. Her question was: “how can we attempt to speak truth to power within institutions without addressing the wider exclusionary logic within which the entire system operates?”. She added that, for ‘frank dialogue’ to take place in this fragile balance, the powerful need to acknowledge their position.

On a more personal note, she commented: “I can’t help but feel that few people would have asked themselves what the experience of that afternoon was like for me

as I struggled to speak over some powerful voices and found my comments at times dismissed by some members of the group.”

Summing up, she agreed that power is a process, but emphasised that it is “imbued with identity”. “Power relations”, she added, “are indeed unfixed, however as a young black woman I am less sure that the privilege and power attached to identity is quite so fluid as the article makes out, and that I think is worth a thought.”

For me, her words opened up a whole raft of questions about identity, which I am continuing to explore in my reading, writing and conversations.

What else did the paper leave out?

In subsequent email exchanges, another person (Jim), whom I had not quoted in my first draft, felt that the group had not picked up some topics he had sought to introduce gently into the discussion. One of these had arisen in his work with the chief executive of a non-profit organisation. I went back to the recording of the group conversation, and I could see that Jim’s story spoke to the desirability and difficulty that leaders can face when trying to encourage their senior colleagues to contribute to decision-making:

Jim: “I’ve been working with a chief executive and his whole thing is about ‘distributed leadership’. He’s arrived in the organisation and people are viewing him very sceptically and saying, ‘Why does he never bang on the table and make a decision?’. I think probably the first six months were quite difficult for him. He was repeating and repeating his ambition to distribute the leadership, with people being party to those decisions and contributors to those decisions, rather than having the decisions made for them or imposed. But I think he’s realised that it’s going to take a few years for this to take hold.”

When I went back to the recording, I noticed that another person had responded to Jim’s story with a mildly sceptical comment about the idea of “distributed leadership”:

Michael: “When I hear people talk about distributed leadership, in relation to power, part of me thinks there’s a naivety. For me it doesn’t pay attention to what’s going on with people. In my institution we’ve got a new vice chancellor and the words ‘distributed leadership’ have been mentioned, and that’s led to people thinking ‘Well, what is distributed leadership? What does this mean in terms of the conversations we’re having and would have been having? What can we imagine that meaning?’.”

From my email exchange with Jim, it became clearer to me how he personally made sense of the term “distributed leadership”:

Jim: “When leaders are being asked to shoulder difficult new responsibilities by the institution that employs them, they will benefit from spaces where they can reflect personally and collectively on what they are taking on and how. Unless there is a

means for achieving understanding and commitment to change, the leaders are on some level abdicating power and those they lead will continue to suffer.”

In one of his emails to me, Jim also reminded me that, during the original conversation, he had spoken of how our personal history influences our ability and willingness to speak truth to power:

Jim (via email): “With hindsight this was relevant, and can be called ontological because it is what shapes our being. We each have a personal history with power and, if we’re to function happily through whatever difficulties we face today, then some guided reflection can be of huge help.”

Jim later wrote of our email exchange: “Thanks for continuing to roll with it as emerging rather than *fait accompli*.” I took this as recognition that, when I as writer invite responses to early drafts, and really make the effort to work them into the document, not only am I acknowledging contributions that may otherwise have been lost; it also means that the written record stands a chance of becoming richer; and finally, it turns it into a living document that can stimulate ongoing inquiry and learning. In this case, I relinquished a tiny amount of my control as author and in return received a number of thoughtful contributions from others. That’s a pretty good bargain in my view.

This write-up is not only a personal one but also (inevitably) represents just a small selection of what was said in what was a three-hour live conversation. Also, it only addresses certain aspects of power relating, partly because the conversation itself was focused on university life, partly because it is no doubt coloured by my personal interests. Last not least, some individuals were more vocal than others, as is normally the case in group conversations. I hope that the subsequent email exchange and my revisions of the paper went some way to redressing the imbalances.

5: HOW WRITING THIS PAPER HAS CHANGED THE AUTHOR

Before I took part in the exchanges described here, I had my own understanding of power relating, which was strongly influenced by my postgraduate studies with Ralph Stacey at the University of Hertfordshire more than 15 years ago. This is roughly what I came to think: first, power is not a *thing* possessed by a few privileged people. Instead, power relating (a more useful term) is a *process* in which people feel constrained to various degrees when interacting with each other. Whenever we relate to another human being, we can’t just say or write what we think, because it can have damaging consequences, whether for ourselves, for them or even for others. If we have any interest in maintaining particular relationships, or just saving face, we therefore adapt what we say or write to the situation.

Since the exchanges, my own perspective has continued to develop and shift:

First, it has really sunk in for me how power relating is *ubiquitous, experienced by everybody and never stops*. No wonder then that we all tend to feel constrained in

one way or another, even those in senior positions. Of course, people at the top typically do have greater authority and influence than those beneath them. They may also be *perceived* as powerful, or even as the embodiment of the institution and its policies. And in their own way, those lower down the hierarchy typically feel limited in what they can say and do too. But it has become clearer than ever to me that, if leaders try to flatten organisations or abolish hierarchy altogether, power relating does not cease. One person in our circle mentioned that she used to work in a non-hierarchical collective: “I can tell you there was power there. There’s something about group dynamics where people will always assert themselves or take on power, even if there’s no structure.” (A recent [article](#) in The Guardian newspaper echoed her experience and expressed scepticism about “flat hierarchies”.)

Second, the experience fuelled my interest in two particular aspects of power relating – first, the stubborn presence of identity (gender, race, class, education level, and so on); and second, the constraints that people in positions of authority face when trying to have a normal human conversation. It seems worth pursuing further the question of how some people try to cultivate open, constructive dialogue in the face of power relations. What does it take to relate to others as human beings rather than as categories or positions in the hierarchy?

Third, I have continued to observe my own interactions. I notice the dance going on between people around control and influence; I try to work out how best to take part in this dance; and I make a habit of paying close attention to what makes it possible or impossible for me (or someone else) to challenge and speak up. For me, it’s important to pay attention to my own experience of power relating, and the way I got caught in the crossfire of university politics was a small but telling example.

Finally, I have been reminded helpfully of the value of *giving writing a social life*. By remaining open to incorporating new and different perspectives, I chose to let go of a measure of authorial control. And yet I was simultaneously using my authorial freedom to (I hope) enrich the paper. Perhaps there is a paradox here: we can actually use our position of authority to let go of a modicum of control while at the same time including voices that have been left out previously.

In short, then, my answer to my own question in the title of this paper is that I do think we can get wiser about power relating, including the part we play ourselves. Indeed, there is a strong case for including power relating as a subject in education, where it isn’t already on the curriculum.

Alison Donaldson, January 2019

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