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Absence, Ignorance, Presence (AIP) – An Exformative Approach to Confronting Legacies of Oppression in Education

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Workshop – Absence, Ignorance, Presence (AIP)

An Exformative Approach To Confronting Legacies of Oppression in Education

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Abstract

Like when laying bare the root subsystem of a very old tree, for systems to be able to confront legacies of oppression in education, we must develop a grammar, a syntax and the appropriate semantics that permit the object matter of “confrontation” to be brought to the surface. To confront, in other words, is an activity of exhumation – and a confrontation is when we stand face to face (con + frons) with matter that was hitherto covered beyond a knowledge horizon separating the worlds of the knowable from the realms of the unknown.

This workshop is an act of exformation – a concept that was first described as “information withheld,” (Nørretranders, 1998), later as “a communication method making things unknown” (Hara, 2015), and finally as “a process of learning by incrementally separating the knowable from the unknown” (Laleman, 2020). The workshop process aims at extracting the oppressive character of education from the unknown, by creating an exformative space in which the activity of con+frons is embedded into the space by facilitated affordances.

Like the seed of a tree has a relatively simple design that ultimately leads to possibly life-changing tree-dependent experiences, so do facilitated affordances require minimum design for maximum outcome.

Through the process of exploring these facilitated affordances, quite counter-intuitively, the legacy of “oppression” in education is not just recognized in the space of dominance and subservience (both aspects of the “presence” of education) – but in different guises of “absence” or “assumed redundancy” of education too.

AIP is a workshop of systemic discovery in space. Facilitation is gentle, almost oblique, and restricted to ad-hoc translation of group-emergent features into affordances. Participants explore and learn cooperatively - with, from and among each other. They work with objects and grids as temporary placeholders of ideas - and build mental models that provide for experiential revelation of facets of oppression in the realms of skills and knowledge “management.”

Keywords: systemic workshop, design for social innovation, confronting legacies of oppression, exformation, education, educational reform, design for change

RSD: Learning & Education, Society & Culture, Methods & Methodology

Exformation in workshop design

Exformative workshop processes are systemic, spatial, cooperative, conversational, objectified, and choreographed. They are what the legendary Zen master Zeami Motokiyo called “mostly tai” and “unpredictable yu” – where if “tai” is the moon, “yu” is moonlight – or if “tai” is a flower, “yu” is its scent (Oida & Marshall, 1997).

Also, exformative workshops are examples of design for social innovation – having in mind not so much a number of pre-defined “outputs,” but rather, making space for new knowledge, processes, methods, and questions. We are envisaging outcomes rather than output – with outcomes eliciting transformation in the hearts and memories of those who engage in it (Amatullo et al. (Eds.), 2022).

The systemic and spatial nature of exformative workshops is with the fact that a group of people is gently choreographed through an explorative, conversational space, where the choreography is (part of) the workshop design proper, while the outcome of the conversation, even if dependent on affordances provided by the space-to-people dynamics, remains in the unknown until it is made knowable by the participants going through the process.

In an exformative workshop, thinking and acting like being lost in the forest is the preferred state-of-mind (Laleman, 2020; Mau, 2020). The systemic aspect of exformation is with its uncovering of pathways and solutions existent within the realms of possibilities, but not previously owned. If there is already a path to walk, then someone else owns it (Mau, 2020) – and the semantics of that particular track need to be re-adjusted and re-thought through a process of cooperative exploration.

The workshop is cooperative in the sense that the participants each contribute to the outcome, and conversational because conversation is both the process and the expected outcome.

Objectification is an exformative conversational technique where physical objects are attributed a placeholder role for concepts and ideas that are brought forth – giving them “shape” as an added semantic dimension.

AIP, a threefold phenomenology of oppression

Absence, ignorance, presence (AIP) is a sequential phenomenological research method, in the form of a spatial game played with participants in a group, and using ontological reasoning and multi-dimensional semantics, loosely based on post-classical Buddhist argumentative structures, practiced and taught by the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna in the 3rd century CE (Tachikawa, 1997; Kalupahana, 2008).

In a framework of confronting legacies of oppression in education, in this workshop, AID is applied to the bold assertion by Paulo Freire that there is in fact such a thing as a “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1970) – implying that oppression is consolidated by the absence of a liberating pedagogy, or by the presence of a non-liberating pedagogy, or by sheer ignorance (or denial) of any causal relationship between pedagogy and oppression (Laleman, 2020, June 1).

Workshop outcomes

A two-hour workshop applying AIP on a confrontation with legacies of oppression in education can have but limited outcomes. But this need not deter us from doing this. Effective change and societal innovation obviously begin with a strong sense of urgency plus the commitment to bring something new into world (Block, 2008). For this, an Allan Cohen-type emergent design model may not be quite sufficient (Block, 2008), unless juxtaposed with a deep awareness and understanding of the geographies of power (Amatullo et al. (Eds.), 2022). With this in mind, cooperative shifting of the systemic context is essential. Context is an interlinked set of beliefs, often existing in the realms of subconsciousness and sub-awareness, that dictate how we think, how we frame our understanding, what we pay attention to, and consequently how we behave (Block, 2008). The present AIP workshop is designed to contribute to the art of using augmented semantics to help reposition the conditions for such a shift.

Workshop outline

120 minutes | in person | no more than 36 participants

large room without furniture | 3 “aspect spaces” | a collection of random objects

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| 0:00-0:15 | welcome, building safe space |
| 0:15-0:25 | acting out: confronting legacies of oppression in education |
| 0:15-0:25 | activity: participants collect three random objects each |
| 0:25-0:35 | examples: objectification |
| 0:35-0:40 | participants spread out over three “aspect spaces” A, I, and P |
| 0:40-0:55 | round 1 |
| | participants gather stories illustrating the aspect of the space they are in. (The aspects are absence of education, ignorance about the need for education, and presence of an oppressive education. The participants assign their stories to any number of the randomly gathered objects in the room. They can steal objects from other aspect spaces if necessary.) |
| 0:55-1:00 | short review and redistribution of participants in new “aspect spaces” |
| 1:00-1:15 | round 2 |

1:15-1:20	review and redistribution
1:20-1:35	round 3
1:35-1:40	review and return to unified space
1:40-1:45	conceptual art gallery: an objectified anatomy of oppression in education
1:50-2:00	activity: cooperative storytelling

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