English as Affirmative Action … But Affirming What? A Study of Interactions in the Affirmative Space

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ABSTRACT

Affirmative Actions (AA) in education are presumed to be interventions that enable access to educational spaces and by extension to quality learning opportunities. The assumption is that these programs would build capabilities that affirm their identities while providing equal opportunities to socio-economic growth and thus, again by extension enable agency. But is that what they do? We begin by placing agency as the terminal goal of AA. We then situate our study within a ‘Third space’ framework to examine the interactional space in an AA – A space of asymmetrical power and advantage inhabited by the implementer of the AA and a participant in an AA intervention. Therefore the question we ask in this study is: how are structures of dominance produced? Based on the analysis of the interactions we find several power-inflected controls that impact the actors of AA. This paper reports three sets of language use patterns and three modes of establishing dominance, all of which work in tandem to annihilate any possibility of nurturing the capability to act and voice oneself. Based on our study we propose that if AA has to materialize into affirming agency then the possibility of contestation and mediation needs to be built into the AA program. How and what changes need to be brought in to humanize each of the stakeholders is the billion dollar question.

Keywords: Language as affirmative action, English, agency in academic space, dehumanize

Introduction

Affirmative Action (AA) is perpetually framed in reparative language as any effort to remedy socially inherent inequalities through concrete measures. Most often AA is framed along one of the two rationales: one, right the wrongs done by dominant groups to specific cultural, ethnic or linguistic groups/communities; two, elevate visibility of otherwise underrepresented groups whose capabilities were never seen as contributing to the society. In
any case, AA is rationalized either as a mode of repentance or a means for social justice or most often both. Whether AA takes off from the ‘backward looking’ logic of making up for wrong done in the past or from the ‘forward-looking’ position of nurturing and cherishing diversity in and for an equitable society, we believe that AA be perceived as a possibility for nurturing agency through its specific policies, programs, procedures and products. This aspiration for agency becomes all the more relevant if the AA is to be conceptualized in education since educational and learning opportunities are recognized as significant factors for a possible positive snow-balling ‘multiplier effect’ (UN global report on Education, 2016)

With the ideal that any AA should nurture and enable agency we began conceptualizing this narrative case study. The coveted outcomes for the recipient of our AA were two-fold: one to symbolically and operationally have some degree of control over one’s own behavior and over those whose actions in the world affect oneself (Duranti, 2004); and two, attain the capability to mediate and act (Ahearn, 2001). Both the goals we believe are significant given that any learning involves the crucial decision of whether to embark on a painful never-ending process of learning-unlearning-relearning cycles. Nonetheless, we were also aware that for the sense of agency to develop, a pedagogic space with the following two mutually inclusive aspects is pivotal: one, the ‘individual’ willingness to invest in their learning processes and the availability of the social-cognitive support systems that will feed the ‘willingness’. AA should ideally provide a space for both and language in the process IS crucial. Language is both a tool for exhibiting agency and a strategy for attaining agency. English capability was presumed to be the object for realizing agency in the study. Thus was born our AA intervention that aimed to improve the recipient’s English language capability as the means to nurture agency. What ensues in the following pages is the analytical narration of the language events in the AA intervention between two stakeholders: the implementer and the participant. We situate our study in the theoretical framework of ‘Third space’ to study the nature of the interactions between the two stakeholders.

In the ensuing sections of the paper we present an etic\(^1\) version of the events in the AA intervention. In the first part of the paper, we present the

\(^1\) This paper does not engage in the lived realities of any of the three stakeholders: Mx. C the commissioner of the AA; Mx P the participant and Mx I the implementer
theoretical underpinning for the study along with how the AA intervention materialized the theory. In the second section the background for the AA intervention along with the AA intervention is presented. The third part presents the study on the AA intervention while the final section summarizes and discusses our learning from the intervention.

**Affirmative space in our Affirmative Action Intervention (AA Intervention)**

In this study we construed Affirmative Action (AA) as deliberate creation of a space (idealized for countering dominance and engaging incapability building). So the interventional AA space creation itself has to be understood and for this we draw on the Third Spaces theory. The conceptualization of the Third space begins with Lefebvre’s work on space. He discusses space as a three-part dialectic between everyday practices and perceptions as the *first space*, representations or theories of space as *second space* and the spatial imaginary of the time as the *third space*. For instance for all of us, concrete home experience (everyday knowledge) and the arbitrary college discourses (academic knowledge) are the first and second spaces. The third spaces are the in-between, or hybrid spaces, where the first and second spaces work together to generate a new third space. Edward Soja (1996) expands the thinking about space and spatiality. For Soja, Space is a social product and so serves as a tool of thought, of action, of control and of dominance. It is hence a means of producing power and dominance. Spatiality then is the product of the space-specific social interactions and a unique articulation of social network, relations, understandings and meanings. This implies that interactions in the space are constantly mobilized to maintain power relationship. First and second spaces are then two different, and possibly conflicting, interactional groupings and third space is where people interact physically and socially. An AA space when viewed from this theoretical lens, is a socially produced, planned space with certain thoughts and actions for certain target groups with certain pre-specified outcomes; and where certain people interact relationally to live the space.

**Materialization of the third space theory in the AA intervention**

In the AA intervention, the first space, is comprehended as the known physical, concrete, *objective* and measurable arrangements. Arrangements of the AA. Instead we look at the nature of interactions between Mx I and Mx. P to understand the nature of interactions.
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could include activities, patterns of distribution, design of programs, and mappable behavioral entities. So the first space of the AA intervention is materialistic in that it marks out quotas, allocates funds and designs specific traits into the programs for ethnic, linguistic minority communities. In the AA intervention an idiosyncratic needs analysis by Mx. C identified a possible deficiency in ENGLISH ‘language capability’ as the target of the AA. A pattern of distributing fiscal and spatial resources was thus designed in the form of living quarters, a sustenance fund and a ‘suitable’ course (from a plethora) for the participant to attend. Attending this course was tied to a tangible written output on a pre-decided topic.

The second space, the imagined possibilities in the AA Intervention space, the more ambitious one, is ideational – it represents a way of thinking. It is here that interpretations re-presentation the world experiences are reconstituted into actions. Discourses on how to ensure better learning or good intentions for social justice dominate the space. In short, discourses on how the space is to be used, what ideas will find prominence to shape the events in the space happen here. So this is a mental space that can be liberating OR dominating, regulatory and controlling as well – clearly the action zone where actors act out. Presumptions of what needs to be addressed in the AA intervention are voiced. Discourses on the possible actions the recipients could do occupied this space. For instance, what can be done on the course? What conventions would have to be followed? and how would the scholarship be accounted for? Here the recipient is the subject of all discussion between the planner and the implementer. Consequently, the second space of the AA intervention mandated the institutional norms and expectations either through behavior or ways of accounting for the ‘scholarship’ or both. In short a regimen of domineering discourses was in place.

The third space of the AA space is directly the lived space- a potent potential which can have a cascading effect either ways. It is here that the real (first space) and the imagined spaces (second space) mingle to create novel experiences. This is the practicum space where people are the inhabitants and the users of the AA intervention; where certain symbolic designs, texts and signs that are alleged to be liberating and empowering are encountered by the actors; where each actors’ experience meet the symbolic plans to create contradictions and conflicts; where the possibility of realizing agency can potentially materialize into the opposite. Far from liberating, these experiences could foreground structures of power that breed
subordination, voicelessness, conflict and struggle. Hence examining events in this space will give an empirical strength to our discussion of how structures of dominance are produced.

The genesis of the AA intervention

Mx. P is a first generation learner from a recognized marginalized community. Hence, Mx. P’s tryst with the Affirmative Action initiatives is a long one. Reserved seats and a moderated cut-off score in the country-wide qualifying examination secured Mx. P admission to the university’s course. Vivid recounts of scorn and ridicule along with physical and mental violence meted out by fellow students and seniors-in-residence, as Mx. P puts it, have been a part of his life on campus. Specifically Mx. P underscores the fact that access to educational resources and quality scaffolding of learning are not universal and hence unevenly distributed.

After 5 years of completion of studies, Mx. P, unlike others, could not land a job. The need for the AA intervention arouse when Mx. C recognized the need to support Mx. P. According to Mx C, one reason (among others) contributing to Mx. P’s difficulties in the job market was Mx. P’s ‘not so good’ English. This recognition leads to the AA intervention which required Mx. P attends a course designed to build academic reading and writing capability. Further the AA intervention included a sustenance fund, access to the library and a living space. In lieu of the scholarship, Mx. P would submit a report on a pre-decided topic and the course would help Mx. P in drafting the report.

Method

This qualitative study spanned over a period of 4 months in an institution of higher education. It involved three stakeholders: the Commissioner of the Intervention (Mx. C), the Implementer (Mx. I, the teacher-researcher) and the Participant (Mx. P, the recipient). We did not engage with the lived experiences of the three stakeholders given the fact that when viewed through the theoretical lens of Third space, each stakeholder’s lived experience on the intervention would vary. So we adopted the ‘fly on the wall’ approach to analyse the data. Here we draw on multiple sources of data documented by Mx. I from two sites of interactions with Mx. P: the classroom space and the dining hall. Mx I’s teaching journal entries and conversations with Mx. P and Mx. C are the sources of data. Journal entries were examined first and all entries mentioning Mx. P were collated for
analysis. Documents conversations with Mx. P were transcribed verbatim. Since the conversations are bilingual, a translation is made available in this format <bold text>. Instead of working through a process of inducting commonalities across the sources, we examined each of the sources separately to understand how structures of dominance are perpetuated. In the following section, we offer a few brief excerpts of presumptive normative practices. We use them to illustrate both the practices themselves and how they impose dominance and restriction.

Three patterns of language practices: Compliance, contestation and mediation

Prescription of compliance

In the first pattern, Language is presumed to be a tool to counter several contexts of inequality. In excerpt 1, Mx. C does several things. Mx. C evaluates Mx. P’s English language capability as being inadequate in the job market and attributes that as the reason for being unemployed. Emanating from this assessment is the prescription of treating this deficiency through a course. Mx. C acknowledges the value of language as a symbolic capital and forges connection with one’s socio-economic background.

Excerpt 1:
Unlike Mx. P’s batchmates, Mx. P still unsettled and needs support. … comes from a marginalized background and … language is kind of weak so I am asking Mx. P to do the communication skills course that you are offering with the kind of surety that you will also help him on the report. Even if it is experiential…I am asking Mx. P to write a kind of report on the affirmative action experience. Right now Mx. P needs to have a space and basics taken care of…

This excerpt reflects two presumptions. One, that English capabilities encapsulate one’s professional abilities; therefore, deficiency in this language necessarily means a deficiency in his cognitive capabilities. Two, that addressing the ‘language’ gap necessarily addresses conceptual capabilities. Both the presumptions work in imposing the course on Mx. P and the iteration of Mx. P’s needs seal a mandated compliance from Mx. P.

Possibility of contestation

Excerpt 2 on how using a specific language presumes capability comes from Mx. P, the participant of the AA intervention. The excerpt carries a host of
powerful ideological undertones. Mx. P describes a classroom situation where language of response and participation in the classroom becomes a marker of one’s caste and the mode of one’s entry into the university. English becomes a form of status and power marker and also a marker of membership. One’s identity is that of an in-group or an out-group. Mx. P argues that one has to appropriate this norm. When Mx. I attempts to engage Mx. P in questioning the dominance of a language along with the power identity it brings, Mx. P contests directly the presupposed context of inequality one finds oneself in and where the language becomes a *shibboleth* and this aspect rarely changes across time.

<table>
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<th>Excerpt 2</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mx. P</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. That is one point of difference between upper caste children who come from rich backgrounds. I have seen that children who know English speak fast and first. Even if I want to speak…my English is bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mx. I</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Why wouldn’t you speak in Hindi? You have a language with you to frame….what stopped you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mx. P</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. You would not know how people see and talk after that. How you speak English is first marker of recognition – general quota or backdoor quota. Your membership is decided that day and that will not change even in 5 years of XXX school. Here Professors teach all those powerful courses and they attend them but will not change.</td>
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In contrast to excerpt 1, excerpt 2, captures two aspects in one go: a willingness to succumb to the pressure of linguistic compliance and an unwillingness to directly contest the prescribed language of communication. The unwillingness to counter the dominance of English means a lost possibility to contest any form of institutional dominance. In the context of the AA intervention it also meant a lost opportunity to mediate on any aspect of the intervention for Mx. P at the very beginning of the intervention. However, Mx. P does not give up.

**Attempts to mediate the polarities of equality**

Even as we attempt to understand ways in which dominance/voicelessness is established, we must acknowledge the complexities of power as they operate in academic spaces. The nature of interactions, in excerpt 3, involves an unequal power relationship which Urciuoli (1997) calls *outer sphere* interactions. A scenario where nothing is equal and little is common between the interlocutors, for instance, an interaction between someone representing an institution and the recipient of the services provided by the institution.
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They have neither shared repertoires, nor language, and often the recipients find themselves in unanswerable and unquestionable circumstance. Excerpt 3 is the beginning of several such sequences of interactions.

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<th>Excerpt 3</th>
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<td><strong>Mx. P</strong></td>
<td>4. … that I have to do a course on Communication Skills (CS)…so some speaking skills will be there in the course. Please share the course outline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mx. I</strong></td>
<td>5. Yes I will. I was informed…but the course is not on CS but on Academic reading and writing. The course aims to build researching skills as well as writing skill… skills that you will need to write your report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mx. P</strong></td>
<td>6. But ma’am, I am preparing for XXXX examinations …so if my English skill improves then I think that will help me in many ways…job and exam…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mx. I</strong></td>
<td>7. Right….but is that the immediate concern? You will have to submit a report as an output of your scholarship so…we will have to work on those skills for you to write. You will need researching and academic writing components.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mx. P</strong></td>
<td>8. (Looks away) umm..</td>
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On the face of ANY interactions, mediations can occur and will arise from the opportunities and the requirements of a particular circumstance. In this case it emerges when Mx. P attempts to mediate a need in voicing a possibility of finding ‘speaking skill’. The subtle version of contestation couched in “but” takes a meditational turn when the need is iterated through a purpose of “preparing for XXXX examinations” and a goal of succeeding in “job and exam”. An attempt to gain control over one’s learning is seen here. However, a direct reference to the “immediate concern” coupled with the absence of any “soft talk” converts the attempted meditational talk to a confrontation. Mx. I’s structural advantage over Mx. P becomes evident in pointing out the ‘output’ and the skill required to complete the task. Lacking the mediational power to speak and be heard, Mx. P looks away.

Three ways of marshalling dominance

**Dehumanizing ‘experiences’**

Despite the fundamental pedagogic principle that educational activity should create a level playing field by building on students’ everyday experiences and thus unlock the power of students’ everyday voices to contest naïve
beliefs of being deficit, we want to acknowledge the asymmetrical structural positions of power between the two. We point out that one cannot ignore those structures of power and the way they manifest themselves when creating AA programs because these very structures begin to breed encounters against the very purpose of the program. One does not need to bank on the research on ‘recognition’ to understand that treating anybody with subtle disrespect, condescension and everyday thoughtlessness impacts the cognitive and the emotional bases of being human (Haslam, 2011). Excerpt 4 initiates the dehumanizing process.

<table>
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<th>Excerpt 4.1</th>
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<td>Mx. P 9. I was told to write on my experiences on caste discrimination and I have so many experiences from many places. I know that discrimination exists everywhere. I have spoken to many other students and they all agree. There is so much of discrimination everywhere….and we ……(still speaking)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mx. I 10.(cuts him midway…shakes head in disapproval and shows signs of restlessness ) Right. But that will be experiential…and by default anecdotal….like stories…how would you write it in your final document? As stories? For a project report? You will need to read up research and systematically write it up. Stories are not enough…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mx. P 11.(cuts midway) They are my experiences and I know them… (looks away)..</td>
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In line 9, Mx. P points to the experiences of being dehumanized (let alone subtle). An initialization of a whole possibility of conversations around aspects that debase especially in educational AA programs unfolds itself. An opportunity to engage in a whole range of discussions around visible and invisible forms of oppression, suffering and discriminatory practices on a wider scale was lost when Mx. I calls these experiences as ‘anecdotes and stories’; shows signs of restlessness and questions whether ‘unprocessed’ experiences have a place in an academic report; and finally belittles ‘stories’ for ‘researching’. Calling experiences ‘by default’ as anecdotes inaugurates the process of invalidation that seals it as a running theme throughout the interactions between Mx. P and Mx. I. The emotional maltreatment Mx. I metes out is clearly ostracizing to the extent that Mx. P initiates an attempt to validate his voice but gives up. Why? One cannot ignore the tinge of micro aggression in statement 11 when Mx. P cuts in and asserts ownership over the experiences and reminiscences of those incidents and then looks away. At this juncture we only mention that paralinguistic aspects (such as change in
pitch, intonation, audiability) and non-linguistic aspects (such as looking away, bowing head, avoiding eye-contact) represent a metapragmatic awareness of the situational power and of one’s helplessness.

**Microinvalidation and condescension**

As sub-themes Microinvalidation and condescension happen simultaneously and as one feeding the other. The prefix ‘micro’ showcases how invalidation that happens in small aspects can have a snow-ball effect. In continuing the dehumanizing thread, microinvalidation is the sequence of acts that systematically negate one’s initial ideas and thoughts at the initial stages before they can be concretely thought out. Eventually the thoughts as well as the person could be excluded. As one of the modes of dehumanizing, incidents of microinvalidation have been identified to be a strong predictor of aversive self-awareness, loss of status and hostility (Sue, et al. 2007). Condescension, as a derivative of condescend, is operationalized as assuming little knowledge on an aspect of knowledge and hence point out gaps in thinking and/or explain things in a loud and simplistic way. Incidents of condescension, like microinvalidation have been strong predictors of aversive self-awareness and cognitive withdrawal. Together condescension and microinvalidation have predicted educational retraction (Richman and Leary, 2009; Sue et al. 2007). This excerpt is representative of both the dehumanizing aspects happening simultaneously and of the outcomes the two sub-themes are known to materialize.

Excerpt 4.1 and 4.2 happen at the same space and time frame and so should be read in continuation. It is the third out-of-classroom meeting and everything about the conversation is formal except for the spatial location. The thread of invalidation continues in small microcosmic sequences in excerpt 4.2. It reaches new and debilitating heights in statement 16 where Mx. I questions the integrity of ‘the experienced’ by voicing a possibility of the experience being “concoctions” “hallucinations” “perceptions” of discrimination when “there could be none”. Narrations are “after all” one versions of the fact. In the process of doubting ‘the stories’, attributes of human uniqueness and human nature such as self-worth and emotionality are undermined, not to mention humiliation and the sense of being less human - silencing any possibility of contestation and mediation.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Excerpt 4.2</th>
<th>Mx. I</th>
<th>12. I know but anecdotes are anecdotes. …unless they are processed systematically and linked to literature on discrimination</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mx. P</td>
<td>13. I have read some thinkers like Ambedkar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy…I will write about their views on discrimination…</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mx. I</td>
<td>14. (Ok..but… Where will the connection for your experiences and the thinkers come from? How will you connect? Theoretical framework ke bare main sochakya? &lt; Have you thought about a theoretical framework?&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mx. P</td>
<td>15. Abhi nahi par mein ..mein aur padhuungaa and aur logon se baath karoonga in other universities so mujhe aur experiences milege…tho sab ko document karoonga &lt;not yet but I will. I will read more and talk to other people here and other universities as well. I will get their experiences as well and then I will document them&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mx. I</td>
<td>16. More stories…but from one actor after all. Right? You have only one stakeholder telling you their truths. How do we know whether it is discrimination and not a perception of being discriminated? It could be a concoction or a hallucination. That is the speaker thinks he is discriminated when there could be no such thing. Triangulate kaise karoge? &lt;How will you triangulate?&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mx. P</td>
<td>17. Aap research kar rahe ho tho one stakeholder kaa information one sided hotha hai….thoda distance karo varnaa Validity kaa issues honge tho data reliable kaise hogaa? &lt; you are researching and you have information from just one stakeholder then that is partial information…… distance yourself or else we will have issues of validity. Then how will the data be reliable?&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mx. P</td>
<td>18. Patha nahi&lt;I do not know &gt; Tho main questionnaire prepare karoonga interview ke liye aur ..&lt;then I will design a questionnaire for interviewing and …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mx. I</td>
<td>19. (cuts in )…Questionnaire ke liye bhi ek framework ki zarroorath hai. &lt;even a questionnaire will require a framework&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20. Most important… think how will you decide who you will contact? And why them? So researching methods follow karnaa. &lt;you need to follow the researching methods&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21. Class mein yeh components discuss kar rahe hain. Dhyaan nahi de rahethe kyaa?…&lt;we were discussing some of these aspects of researching in class. Weren’t you paying attention?&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>22. (shakes his head ) Patha nahi…I do not know).</td>
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</table>
Having invalidated the idea of documenting experiences without considering the richness of details and narrations they could add to the AA initiatives that Mx. P and the other respondents would have lived through, Mx. I embarks on a discourse of “systematic processing” and “linked to literature on discrimination”. Mx. I initiates the act of condescension through terms like “triangulation” “validity” and “reliability” “theoretical framework” and finally “research methods”. The psychological distancing Mx. I advocates in statement 17, implies an objectification of the experiences that have been an integral part of one’s existence and a defining feature of identity and status. Being treated thus is likely to elicit a sense that one’s existence is unimportant. One’s identity as a person has been denied.

**Surveillance and denial of intrinsic engagement**

Before excerpt 5 is visited a quick examination of Mx. I’s teaching journal is necessary. Mx.I’s teaching journal for the course that Mx P was mandated to attend has 42 pages of entries pertaining to the XX hours of teaching. The single agenda examination of the journal is on Surveillance i.e. a series of administrative and/or pedagogic strategies and initiatives designed to monitor the extent (and authenticity) of student engagement in the learning process (Gump, 2005). For the sake of this discussion we construe surveillance as tracking. Hence surveillance was operationalized along the following questions: how many students find specific mention in the journal? In what contexts were they noted? Whether any comments were made? And if a ‘follow-up’ indicator exists?

In all, 23 student names (excluding Mx. P) find mention in the journal and none were repeated. The purpose of mentioning is as follows: 2 names for joining the course late and so needing to make up for the lost sessions; 9 for the questions they asked in class; 4 for the clarification they sought on the feedback provided; 3 for seeking a break that Saturday; 2 petitioned for an extension in submission; 1 for constantly chatting; 2 asking for a discussion appointment. No ‘follow-up’ indicators were made for any of the 23 students. Contrasting this, Mx. P occurs 15 times in the journal entries in different sessions: 5 times on the time of arrival; 3 times on leaving early or during the break; 3 times for missing class and 4 times as being distant, unfocused and unengaged. 6 follow-up indicators were made for Mx. P which mean that Mx. P would be observed further and asked for justifications.
We are aware of literature on *overt* forms of surveillance in learning through attendance registers, plagiarism software and certifying demands on assignments and dissertations. How would one deal with covert forms of surveillance when it is couched in several other forms? For instance, in this case, Mx. I’s teaching journal is a teachers’ reflective entry of classroom eventualities and is not meant for public viewing but can certainly be ‘in the mind’. Nothing can be more infantilizing and draconian than to engage in surveillance measures that negate choice and judgment of how one’s time would be spent. And nothing can be more dehumanizing if one is singled out in a group even if it is to be singled out in a teaching journal. The case is worse if the one being singled-out is not even aware of it and its consequences.

Excerpt 5 (teaching journal entry)

Looks like this structuring of the ‘problem dealing’ is working with most…Engagement is high in the class and on the assignments. But what about Mx. P? …. How can Mx. P be helped if Mx. P neither talks of needs or problems in writing nor submits any assignments nor turns-in classwork for feedback? Mx. P does not do it voluntarily and even when asked Mx. P does not respond. SO….

…there are stakes for everybody. High for some and low for others …learning or the grades or simply the credits. What about Mx. P? According to me stakes are high..very high. Recipients of scholarships have to show accountability and do satisfactorily on whatever is assigned... then why is he indifferent? Mx. P is hardly IN class. Even when in…just gazes around. Why?...must ask Mx. P. (emphasis as in original handwritten text)

…

Excerpt 5 does more than just surveillance. This is where Mx. I reflects on two other aspects: one, notes that the teaching strategy is “working with most” of the participants but not with Mx. P; and two, compares Mx. P and the rest of the class on the levels of engagement on the lines of seeking feedback, engaging in discussions and adhering to submission and on how high or low ‘stakes’ are for doing the course. One does not have to engage with research evidence on factors influencing academic success to identify the link between engagement-in-class and student achievement. For teachers, this would be a given. However, Mx. I’s comments on Mx. P’s engagement deserve attention because the nature of surveillance in these lines do not create a disengaged student but a disengaged recipient of a scholarship who had a higher duty – a duty of *accountability* – but to whom?
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Discussion

We contended that ideally the objective of any AA initiative in education (or employment) is to realize agency. Agency, as this study construes is the socially mediated ability to have control over one’s actions and over other’s actions that impact one’s life. Therefore, AA in education are considered to be powerful modes of creating ‘level playing fields’ for otherwise marginalized communities. More often AA programs are hailed as equalizers because they are the top-down mechanisms for enabling political power and access to socio-economic spaces and growth to marginalized groups. However, what is realized in an AA intervention is a billion dollar question? Therefore this study set out to investigate one such initiative. Given that any AA is an initiative to change existent living conditions of certain groups, AA essentially involves the idealization and creation of a space where the realities meet the idealized. Hence this space needs to be created. We situate the study in the ‘third space’ framework which recognizes that social relationships and the nature of social interactions within these social relationships are seldom free of structural power and dominance. What happens in the third space is of utmost significance since the nature of interactions can be liberating or debilitating primarily for the recipients. Consequently through our case study we wanted to investigate how structural power is manifest and reproduced in the third space of an AA. To this extent the interactions between the implementer and the participant of the AA intervention were examined through their interactions on a course on academic reading and writing.

The analysis reveals two major sets of practices that evolve and attenuate dominance in the space. The first set of practices pertains to how language as an autonomous object, as a tool and as a strategy, function in the AA intervention. English is the language of ‘operations’ across the three practices. If a far-from-satisfactory functionality in English language capability is presumed to cause reduced opportunities in the employment market, then it prescribes language as an object for the treatment of the ailment. In the second practice, English language capability is highlighted as the marker of in-group from out-group; as a breeder and perpetuator of power zones among peers, it becomes a tool that can be wielded to contest (or to accommodate). In the third practice, language becomes the strategy to mediate for one’s requirements. The second sets of practices pertain to how dominance is rationalized. We note that the first sets and the second sets of practices are not independent but intertwined with each other. The second
sets of practices marshal dominance through strategies of dehumanization. First, validating certain ‘knowing’ as legitimate and naming the rest as ‘anecdotal’ or ‘perceptions’; second, systematic negations and gradual exclusion of the ideas put forth as not thought out or crude and then legitimizing certain modes of enquiry as authentic and valid; third, assuming little knowledge to engage in patronizing talk; fourth, covert surveillance and comparison with other participants; fifth, questioning the integrity of the participant by invoking the issue of ‘stakes’ and finally, attributing the lack of engagement to the absence of accountability.

Why are the patterns of interaction in the study thus? We believe there are two reasons. First, English is posited as the unquestioned ‘natural’ lingua franca for academic purposes because of the “self-reinforcing loop of language flow”. Carli and Ammon (2007) show the circularity of the situation: texts in English are circulated, so read, cited and indexed; and texts in English are cited, so read, circulated and indexed – a trend that reinforces English as the only language of academics and therefore slotted as a commodity for uptake in an AA initiative. Any AA that ignores the multilingual realities and capabilities of its participants to create accommodation that perpetuates the English loop is a manifestation of the monolingual mindset. A closer investigation is these spaces should be creating ventriloquists and oppressive dehumanized spaces like our case study did. Language practices identified here are debilitating since they uphold a monolingual, monolithic standards of language, language use and knowledge as the universal. Second, the inequality and power play in the AA space comes from the inherent nature of what Urciuoli calls as the outer-sphere interactions: interactions between a representative of an institution and the lay person. Education and educating are powerful acts and power is central to the educational processes. How we locate ourselves and others in these processes determines the power-geometries in the space. In this sense the study is limited to interactions between one pair of stakeholders. Analyzing the same between the other two pairs would illuminate further nuanced polarities in equality and structural manifests of dominance.

**Conclusion**

Our analysis suggests how important it is for implementers of AA for marginalized communities to correct past oversights and more carefully attend to the realities, experiences, needs and anxieties of the communities. It highlights that participants of AA are seen as peripheral participants and not
as apprentices who aspire and strive to be a meaningful part of the societal space and as socializing agents. As our study capsulizes mainstream viewpoints do not conceive of partnerships where possibilities of contestation and mediation are interwoven into the interactional space, and hence compliance becomes the norm. AA far from realizing emancipatory agency, will create oppressive spaces that dehumanize.

Understanding the dominance of knowledge structures and nature of socializing interactions in the AA space across different domains of implementation is critical to the development of more honest, participatory and emancipatory relationships. New understandings of AA space have a significant contribution to make in education in general, through critiquing the space and dissecting the relationships between people, ideas and objects that are implicit in the construction of the learning space. Demanding for the space where the actors of the AA can debate the power relationships instantiated into the system so that we uncover and read what familiarity blinds us is probably the need of the hour. How we do it is the challenge?

References


