



The Power of Truth

Alternative tool name: The “W” tool

Tool Profile

Approximate time needed:
15-30’

Adaptable to online? (y/n):
y, with video for Exercise 1.

Context and Purpose

Background literature:

Foucault, M., Davidson, A.I., Burchell, G., 2008. The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979. Springer.

Escobar, A., 2011. Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World. Princeton University Press.

Forms of power addressed:

Discursive (Framing) power; Structural (Rule-Making) power

Tool aim:

To encourage reflection on different perspectives and especially with respect to the relationships between knowledge/power and truth.

Materials and Setup

Materials needed:

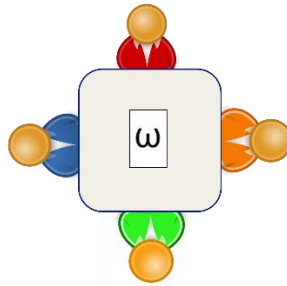
Instruction sheets for “Person 1”, sticky notes, pens

Instructions for facilitators:

Note: If you want to avoid answers such as “a butt,” etc., make sure to emphasize the phrase “alpha-numeric symbol” in the instructions. You will need a space where participants can sit in groups of 4 oriented towards each other as depicted below.

- **“Experiment 1” (7-15’).**
 - **Steps 1.1-3 (5-10’).** Divide participants into groups of 4 and give the instructions below to participants.
 - **Step 1.4 (2-5’).** Have participants briefly report back in plenary.
- **“Experiment 2” (2-5’).**

- **Step 2.1.** Show a diagram of the table set-up from above (see illustration) and explain that, in this experiment, the symbol is already on a card on the table when participants enter. Each participant enters from their respective sides.

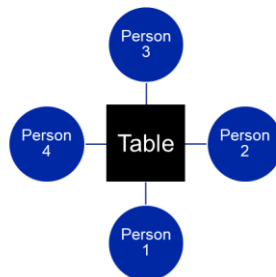


- **Step 2.2.** Rotate the table so that participants see the card from each perspective and ask them which symbol the “green,” “orange,” “red,” and “blue” person sees. (Note: expected answers are “W,” “E,” “M,” and “3”, but other answers are also okay). After finishing the rotation, ask them which one is right/correct. (Ideally the answer is “all of them”).
- **Group reflection (5-20’).** Use any one of the following reflection questions below and/or feel free to add your own:
 - What was the same/different about the two experiments? (Hint: In the first experiment, the person holding the pen had the “power”. Answers to what the symbol was should have been much more variable/contested as some participants view the symbol from the perspective of the drawer, while others might catch on and view it from their own perspective.)
 - How can these experiments help us think about relationships:
 - between one’s **individual perspective** and the **world**?
 - among **multiple perspectives** (between one’s own and those of others)?
 - among **perspectives** (positionality), **power/knowledge**, and **truth**?
 - Escobar argues that “the system of relations establishes a discursive practice that sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what point of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise” (2011, p.41). How does this system of relations emerge in Experiment 1?
 - Escobar also observes: “The forms of power that have appeared act not so much by repression but by normalization; not by ignorance but by controlled knowledge; not by humanitarian concern but by the bureaucratization of social action” (2011, p.53). What does he mean by this and how does it relate to the experiments?
 - Foucault (1978-9 lectures) argues that power and knowledge are inseparable; together they form the ‘truth’ of a particular era. How did power/knowledge work to form the truth in Experiment 1?

Instructions for all participants:

Instructions

- **Step 1.** Get into groups of 4 and situate yourself around a(n) (ideally square) table so that each person sits on one side of the square (see illustration). If there are 5 in your group, one “person” can be a pair.



- **Step 2.** Choose which one of you is going to be “Person 1,” and that person should follow the instructions on the handout. You’ll need a pen.

- **Step 3. For “Person 1” only:**

Instructions for “Person 1” only

1. **Do not read these instructions out loud** and do not share any part of the instructions with other members of your group.
2. Take a sticky note back to your table and stick it in the center of the table/your group.
3. **Important: Make sure each person in your group is watching** (and able to see) and then draw the following symbol, large enough so that all group members can see it:

ω

4. **Without unsticking the sticky note**, ask each group member what they think the **alpha-numeric symbol** is.

Additional Resources

Tool origin story:

This tool was first presented to Sierra Deutsch by a student at Phaung Daw Oo monastic education school in Mandalay, Myanmar where she was teaching concepts from political ecology. Sierra was explaining how our positionalities give us different perspectives and the student shared the teaching from Buddhism using the “w”. Sierra was grateful to have an easier way to explain different perspectives and began using the tool casually as she travelled through SE Asia, and then back in the US. She soon noticed that she got different answers and reactions in Western contexts than she did in SE Asia ones and wanted to explore this more. She reached out to folks at the Center on Teaching and Learning at the University of Oregon and Jason Schreiner helped her to develop the two separate “experiments” and use it as a teaching tool. When Sierra later moved to the Netherlands and began teaching development theory, she realized that the tool was very useful for explaining Foucauldian concepts such as “governmentality” and started intentionally using the tool to help students explore Michel Foucault’s ideas on power-knowledge and truth, and Arturo Escobar’s ideas around discourses and systems of relations.