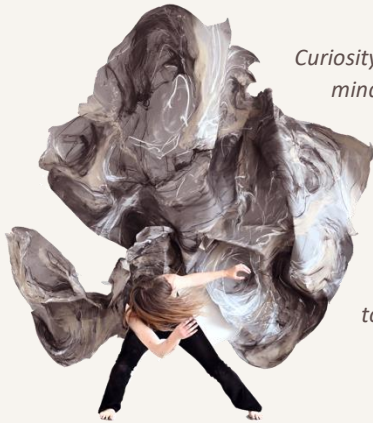


On Power Literacy



Curiosity, the unknown, a journey, deep fundamental questions – these are words that come to mind when we think of a “quest.” For POTRANSI, the overarching quest guiding our research is: How can people transform power relations towards more just, sustainable, and democratic futures, and how might we help enable that? As we carry this main quest forward, each of us focus on different questions, concepts, and methods. Quest insights are short written reflections capturing early ideas and hunches. Rather than providing a final answer, they are threads inviting you to follow our intertwined personal and academic pursuits. They are humble and transparent, shared to spark conversation.

Flor Avelino

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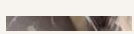
How can power literacy contribute to transformative change, and how can we understand, deepen and shape power literacy? This is one of the main questions in the POTRANSI project. This Quest Insight aims to clarify how we understand power literacy so far, what some of our main questions about it are, and how we approach our ongoing and future research on it?



What is power literacy?

We define power literacy as the ability to recognise power dynamics and to act on them, individually and collectively. More elaborately, power literacy is the ability to recognise, sense, name, understand and act upon power relations in one's societal context, including the underlying causes and impacts, as well as how power relations changed in the past, and how they might change in the future.

The notion of power literacy is inspired by recent scholarship on how to work with power in transdisciplinary settings (de Geus et al., 2023; Gaventa, 2019; Goodwill et al., 2021, Strumińska-Kutra & Scholl 2022). It includes an understanding of what one's own power position is, or might be, in a societal context and a 'practical wisdom' ('phronesis') to deal with existing power relations and change/challenge them where possible. Phronesis can be understood as practical wisdom, contextual judgment, common sense, or prudence. Phronesis is contrasted with pure scientific knowledge ('episteme') and technical knowledge ('techné'), by involving values and 'the art of judgment' (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Our definition of power literacy aims to explicitly include that kind of phronetic understanding of power, incorporating the 'not knowing', accepting uncertainty and complexity, learning by doing and doing by learning.



Why power literacy? Beyond powerlessness, taboos and abstract theories

In my research on power in the past 20 years, one of the things that I found most fascinating is how people often use the notion of power to explain why change is not happening. However, when asked who exactly has power, people tend to emphasise the power of other individuals, other organisations and other sectors, versus the relative powerlessness of their own individual, organization or sector. Here we have one of the many paradoxes of power: everyone points to people in power, and yet hardly anyone considers themselves powerful. This is why, ten years ago, I argued that the (perception of) powerlessness is a greater impediment to change than the power of vested interests. More accurately, I would now argue that vested interest and powerlessness are two sides of the same coin, and the question is how we can acknowledge and navigate both.

Another thing that I have observed in my research, teaching and training on power, is that talking about power remains a social taboo in many places, and people often talk ‘around’ power issues rather than acknowledging and addressing them more overtly and consciously. This is related to the tendency to avoid and appease conflicts and tensions prematurely, thereby missing out on the transformative potential that such conflict may have (as discussed by e.g. Patterson et al., 2024).

These observations on the ‘cycles of powerlessness’, and the taboos around power, have motivated much of my research into power. So far, a lot of that work has revolved around theories of power (e.g. Avelino, 2021). However, if we want to really understand power, we need to go beyond power in the abstract, and we need to tackle specific, existing power inequalities between particular places and people. Some of the most problematic power inequalities today, for instance between the Global North and the Global South, between different classes, ethnicities and genders, between formal and informal places, tend to be obscured in abstract models of power, and I myself have been complicit in such abstractions and binaries.

In the meantime, the theoretical exploration of power will never end, as power is a highly contested and heavily theorized concept across a diversity of literatures and research fields. However, meanwhile, the concept of power also triggers strong connotations, feelings and opinions outside academia. Questions of power, and how it is distributed (or not), preoccupy and drive people across the world, be it in political debates or in everyday organising. I strongly believe that we need to learn much more about how people understand, recognise and talk about power, also in practice.

The notion of power literacy serves to bridge academic explorations of power with more practice-level and everyday understandings and experiences of power. I argue that we need to develop more power literacy to recognise and navigate both power and powerlessness, for people to (learn to) talk about power more honestly, to address problematic power relations, and to identify what are the kinds of power that they themselves can and want to exercise.

Power literacy for transformative change

Power literacy can be approached from many angles, and I am specifically interested in understanding power literacy for/in/through transformative change. In POTRANSI, we specifically ask: How can people transform power relations towards more just, sustainable and democratic futures and how might we further enable that? My hypothesis is that (1) power literacy is necessary for people to transform power relations, and (2) creating more power literacy is one of the ways in which we, as critical and engaged academics more generally, and in the POTRANSI project more specifically, might contribute to such transformation.

In POTRANSI, we are empirically investigating how people across a variety of initiatives and social movements are working on justice, sustainability and democracy, and how and to what extent they are (striving to) transform power relations in that process. In this empirical search, we also aim to understand how people experience power and how and to what extent they consider themselves and others around them to be 'power literate'. Furthermore, we are developing the [Transformative Power Arena](#), as an approach to explore (a) how people can collaborate and learn to transform power relations, and (b) how we as researchers can facilitate that. We expect that power literacy, as in the ability to recognise and act upon power dynamics, will be one of the main ingredients in this endeavour, in the sense of people learning and sharing such ability with each other.

In this process, we are experimenting with methods at the art science interface, such as [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) (De Geus 2026), [Photovoice](#) (Aupoix 2026) and storytelling. Here we build on earlier experiences with action research such as the Transformative Power Lab (De Geus et al. 2021) and the [Just Transition Arena](#) (Schipper et al. 2021). In POTRANSI, we further develop methodologies to organise these kind of gatherings and experiment with alternative forms of inquiry, so as to not only talk about power in the abstract, but to also experience power dynamics in a more embodied manner.

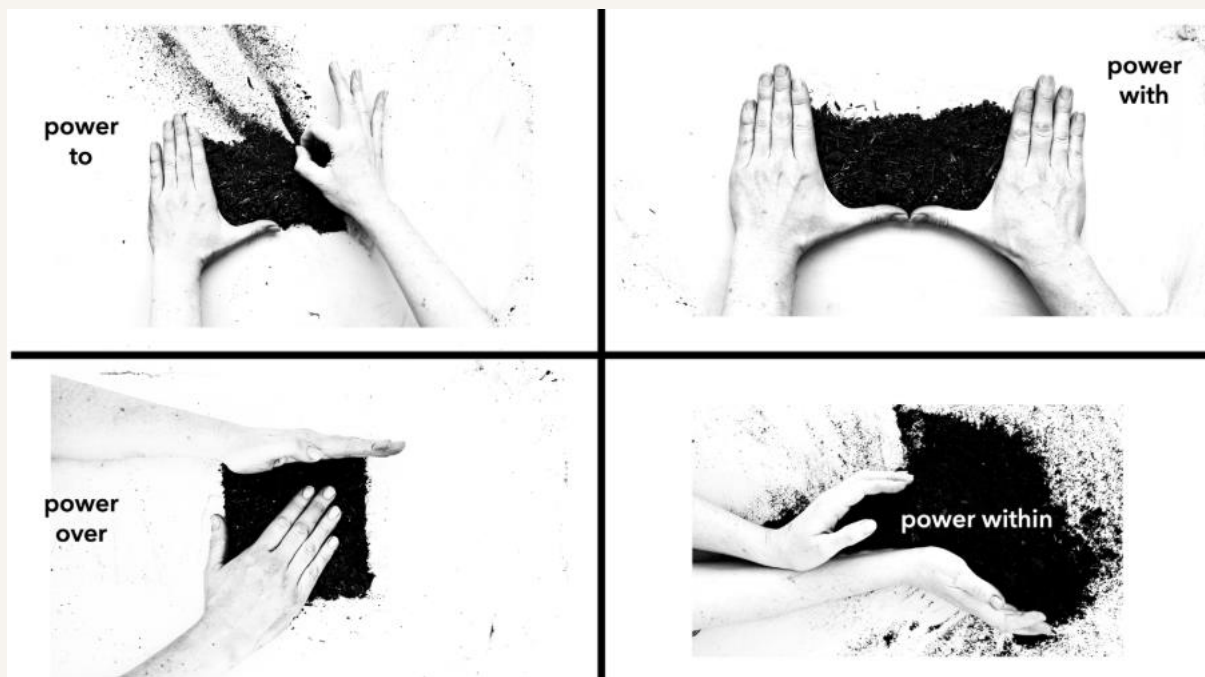


Figure 1. Photographic impression of power to, over, with and within (photography by Marijke de Pous). Source: Avelino 2024, based on Partzsch, 2017, Pansardi & Bindi, 2021.

Challenges around power literacy

On the one hand, power literacy is about translating abstract concepts from political theory for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary contexts. Here the challenge is to simplify power concepts, while at the same time still acknowledging and emphasising the complexity and multiplicity of power. Much of my earlier work has revolved around developing heuristics and interactive methods to facilitate meaningful dialogue on power, together with other colleagues and artists (see example below).

However, while power literacy is partly about visualising and illustrating theoretical concepts or translating them to practice, it is also more than that. In a way, it is also about doing exactly the opposite, as discussed above: to learn how people understand, recognise and talk about power in practice. This interest in the practice of power also raises the question whether power literacy is in fact the right word given the narrow connotation with the ability to read and write. Here it is important to stress that I use literacy in the broader sense of the word, referring not only to written text, but to competence and knowledge in a specific domain. This is a common use of the word literacy in education, where there are references to, e.g. financial literacy, digital literacy, emotional literacy, media literacy, health literacy, ecological literacy, and so on. We particularly follow critical pedagogy and Paulo Freire, who argued that literacy is ‘about reading the world not just the word’, i.e. understanding social and political structures, recognising oppression, and acting to transform that. This broader understanding of literacy has been relatively widespread, in scientific debates as well as in policy. As pointed out by Steet (2011), “With pressure from Freire and other radical thinkers, policy makers recognised the need to address the ‘political and ideological functions [literacy] is expected to fulfil’ (Unesco, 1975, p. 3)”. Indeed, the UNESCO definition of literacy is as follows:

“Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills. Literacy skills themselves are expanding and evolving as people engage more and more with information and learning through digital technology”.

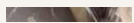
Still, even with this broader understanding of literacy, there is the question how and to what extent literacy on power actually contributes to people being more able to act upon power and change power relations. Possibly, awareness and knowledge about ‘the powers that be’, might also do quite the opposite in terms of paralysing people. On the one hand, I would argue that this depends on what kind of power literacy is fostered, and how power is portrayed therein. Indeed, if we understand power only in terms of power *over* and oppression, then we quickly fall into the pole of ‘paralyzing critique’ as Pel et al. (2021) call it in the article on the dark sides of social innovation. However, if we understand power also in terms of power *to* and power *with*, i.e. Hannah Arendt’s (1970) understanding of power as the capacity of people to act in concert, then the knowledge of that can – in fact – be empowering in and of itself. As Mark Haugaard (2020) has often argued, power should always be understood as both domination and emancipation. If power literacy is about conveying that message, it may do an important task in enabling change.

Regardless of whether our knowledge about power confirms the possibility for change or not, the question remains at what point such knowledge becomes actionable, and at what point such knowledge can enable people to not

only make sense of, but also act upon the power relations around them. What is the relation between power literacy, power wisdom and power competence, and how does all this relate to the capacity to actually change power relations?

To make things even more complicated, there is also the question of whether it makes sense to talk about power literacy in the singular. In earlier publications, we have argued that transformative power, i.e. the capacity to transform, is a complex interaction between prefigurative power (capacity to create new things), reinforcing power (capacity to reinforce things) and countervailing power (capacity to challenge and get rid of things) (De Geus et al. 2023, Avelino 2024). When asking whether we want to enable social change by taking a seat at the table, creating a new table, or breaking the table down, the answer from a transformative power perspective is that you need all three. Because it is very difficult if not impossible to get all three powers exercised by one single actor, it follows that transformative power requires a strategic collaboration and a 'dynamic dance' between different actors who have different competences and repertoires. One could even argue that each type of power comes with an inherently different theory of change.

Coming back to the issue of power literacy then raises the question whether each type of power comes with a different type of power literacy, and whether this implies that transformative power requires a complex set of different – sometimes contradictory – power literacies, plural. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the phrase “rehearsing for the revolution” often appears. However, if transformative change is “more evolution than revolution” as Rotmans et al., (2001) have argued, should we not also be rehearsing for evolution? From a transformative power perspective, I would argue that we vehemently need both, and that power literacy for transformative change should be about reflecting and rehearsing for the (r)evolution.



What's next? Question on Power Literacy

- How, to what extent and under which conditions can which kinds of power literacy contribute to transformative change, and how can we understand, deepen and shape power literacy?
- How can we conceptualise different kinds and dimensions of power literacy/ power literacies, based on a review of both academic and popular literature?
- How can we test and ground power literacy through fieldwork with interviews, participant observation and document reviews?
- How can we embody and practice power literacy through methods at the art-science interface, such as *Theatre of the Oppressed*, photovoice and storytelling?
- How can we combine inward looking power literacy, focused on inner transformation and internal organisational change, with more outward looking power literacy focused on societal transformation?

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