



Exploring Systems and Power with Your Learners

Section A: Exploring Systems with Your Learners

Begin with a working definition of “system.” The definition below is adapted from Project Zero’s Agency by Design project.

Working definition of system: A system is a **collection of parts** that **interact** with or **influence** each other in some way(s), to some end(s).

Provide students some examples of systems, and invite them to come up with their own list of systems. Depending on your learners, you may provide a more complex set of examples. Some examples of systems include: systems of government, transportation, language, architecture, communication, media, family, religion, immigration, the economy, manufacturing, land use, and more. There are also systems of oppression like racism, ableism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, heterosexism, classism, and others.

Suggested tools from the Agency by Design project for exploring systems and developing students’ systems thinking include:

- Parts, Purposes, Complexities: This Project Zero thinking routine can be used to explore the complexity of any object or system and encourages students to get curious about the inner workings of an object or system. Details on how to use this thinking routine can be found on the second page of the linked PDF.
- Parts, People, Interactions: This thinking routine helps students situate people and parts within systems and recognize the various people who participate—either directly or indirectly—within a particular system. Students also notice that a change in one aspect of the system may have both intended and unintended effects on another aspect of the system. Details on how to use this thinking routine can be found on the second page of the linked PDF.

Section B: Exploring the *Multidimensionality of Power* with Your Learners

Connecting to the JusticexDesign Framework

The JusticexDesign pedagogical framework emphasizes the complexity of power. One of JusticexDesign’s pedagogical principles is that *power is multidimensional*, meaning power is

complex and takes many forms. It is not linear and it is not binary. All people and systems have some form of power.

Why is it important to teach about power?

Teaching about power in and of itself empowers students. It also cultivates a critical awareness of their own positionality and lenses through which they view the world. They begin to see power in everything they encounter—news media, literature, relationships, etc. Once aware of one's and others' power(s) as well as power's complexities, learners critically engage with the designs of power in daily life and find opportunities to leverage and shape power to imagine a more just and equitable society.

Before introducing the different types of power from the JusticexDesign framework, invite students to share their own ideas around power. Try one of the following activities:

- **Look, feel, sound:** This is a routine for surfacing students' own understandings and conceptions of power. It is a good activity for introducing power and exploring students' initial ideas around power. Ask your students some version of the following prompts:
 - Top-level prompts:
 - What does power look like?
 - What does power feel like?
 - What does power sound like?
 - Prompts to go a bit further:
 - What does a powerful person look like? Make a list of some features of a powerful person.
 - What does a powerful person sound like?
 - How do you feel when you feel powerful?
- **Draw a powerful person:** Invite students to draw/sketch their own ideas of a powerful person. Their drawing could feature a specific powerful person or be just a drawing of what they think a powerful person looks like. They might draw political or social leaders, family members, teachers, or anyone else they consider a powerful person. Look for opportunities to engage students in dialogue around their artistic or design choices. For example, if they draw a person in a suit or at a microphone, ask them, "What makes his person powerful? How is the microphone a symbol of power?" As you review students' drawings, look for opportunities to ask probing questions that might deepen their understanding of power.

Once students have had the opportunity to surface their own conceptions of—and connections to—power, introduce the different types of power from the JusticexDesign framework:¹

¹ These types of power are situated within JusticexDesign's pedagogical framework and adapted from Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, "[Power and Empowerment](#)," in *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (Practical Action Publishing, 2007), 45.

- **Power over**—having control, being coercive or repressive e.g. the government might have power over the people
- **Power to**—doing something to shape or change your world e.g. a person might have power to sign a petition or volunteer their time
- **Power with**—finding common ground, building collective strength e.g. people might find power collaborating with one another on a project or shared goal
- **Power within**—being able to imagine or feel hope; having personal resolve e.g. people may find power within to be brave, creative, resilient, confident, etc.

Activities for exploring the multidimensionality of power after introducing the types of power:

- **Observing your local area:** Students can visualize or go on a walk and look for evidence of the different types of power in your classroom, school, neighborhood, or community. Remember to have students take pictures and notes of their observations.
- **Scavenger hunt:** Students can look for different types of power in an artwork, poem, novel, etc. They can ask which characters have which powers, or make a concept web showing the relationships between the characters and their different powers.
- **Making a scene:** Students can draw a scene or make a scene using 3D materials that shows power, people, and systems interacting with one another.
- **Mapping:** Students can draw or create a 3D map to show evidence of power in their everyday lives. They could map their neighborhood or a place that is special to them.

Once students have a baseline understanding of the different types of power and the many systems they observe, navigate, and participate in, they will be better prepared to more thoughtfully engage with complex content in your classroom. Below are some JusticexDesign protocols for exploring systems and power with your learners:

- People, Systems, Power, Participation: A JusticexDesign protocol for looking critically at content and developing a sensitivity to power and participation in the design of content, objects, and systems.
- Power, Possibilities, Me: A JusticexDesign protocol for supporting students to consider how forces of power and oppression might be embedded in the design of content, objects, and systems—and to reflect on their own powers in relation to content, objects, and systems.

You might use the above protocols to look closely at a piece of art like a painting, mural, music, dance, or an exhibition of protest art. You might also use the protocols to consider a piece of text like a novel, poem, speech, or historical or legal document. Whatever the case, be sure to encourage students to surface different kinds of power as they reflect on the protocol prompts.