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# Lifelong Learning as Metaphor: Researching Policy in the Education of Adults

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**Abstract:** *Analysts of policy have hitherto not paid much attention to how policy language acts to build up representations of reality. This paper argues for the usefulness of a discursive approach to policy analysis, and illustrates it in the context of emerging policies for 'lifelong learning'.*

## Introduction

The increased interest in discourse and discourse analysis as an approach to policy in recent years has done much to open up fresh avenues of investigation and understanding (Taylor, 1997). However, with some notable exceptions, it has often lacked depth in its understandings of how language is deployed in the attempt to produce certain meanings and effects. This involves studying discourse as social action rather than as mental representation wherein "telling stories is discursive action doing discursive business" (Edwards, 1997, p. 277). The possibility of deploying such resources opens up further spaces of investigation.

It is to an exploration of these issues that this paper is addressed. I want to suggest the usefulness of a discursive approach to policy analysis in the context of emerging policies for lifelong learning. The latter has become a major focus of policy attention in recent years at national and international levels and is articulated not only in the realms of government, but in the economy as well. While there have been some attempts to examine "the kinds of language" (Tight, 1998, p. 474) used in policy texts of lifelong learning, most readings have engaged in conventional and unsystematised forms of ideology critique. What I want to suggest is that a discursive approach to the policy texts of lifelong learning can open up the mobilisations of meaning at play in policy in a more systematic and productive way. In particular I wish to argue that lifelong learning can productively be thought as a metaphor and examined as to the work it does in this light. The paper therefore both argues for a discursive approach to policy analysis and illuminates such an approach through a brief examination of lifelong learning.

The paper is in three parts. First, I outline some of the debates surrounding the study of policy in education. Second, I argue that it is both necessary

and desirable to adopt a discursive approach to policy analysis, in particular, I emphasise the importance of metaphor to such analysis. Third, I explore some of the work of "lifelong learning" in policy by putting aside questions of what it might "really" be, to ask what metaphorical and literal strategies are deployed to engender certain effects and meanings as opposed to others, and what "facts" are fabricated in this. I am not attempting an exhaustive analysis of the policy texts available. I wish to illustrate the potential for the approach with an examination of the United Kingdom government's 1999 White Paper on lifelong learning (Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 1999).

## Studying Policy

There has been much debate in the last ten years as to the methods most appropriate for policy analysis and the need for more "useful" methods than have hitherto been dominant. Underlying this has been on the one hand concerns about the validity of such analysis - what makes it more than opinion? - and on the other hand concerns over the lack of impact on policy of such analyses. These debates have taken place largely outside the realms of those concerned with the education of adults. However, with the increased attention given to lifelong learning in policy, there emerges a question as to how best to engage in policy analysis.

Policy theorists have argued for the adoption of particular methods and perspectives. For example, Evers (1988) suggests an approach using particular scientific epistemological frameworks and methodologies for the analysis of values. Chibulka (1994) argues for a greater focus on system improvement as an outcome of policy studies. Many contributors to the debate suggest a refocussing (Power, 1992), or use of additional strategies of analysis (Codd, 1988, Scheurich, 1994). The diversifying of opinion

on suitable approaches to policy analysis led Hatcher and Troyner (1994, p. 161) to question the coherence within the field: “what meta-theory is necessary to achieve a non-reductionist, totalising theoretical coherence?”

However, Ball (1994) argues for the relinquishing of notions of any one unifying grand theory in favour of plural, poststructural and postmodern approaches. Rather than seeking scientific truth or uncovering ideology and power, policy analysis examines the workings of power-knowledge through the meanings fabricated through and around it. Ball argues that the importance of “clarity” in the determination of policy meanings actually works against an appropriate analysis of policy: “For me, much rests on the meaning or possible meanings that we give to policy; it affects “how” we research and how we interpret what we find.” (Ball, 1994, p. 15). This approach both draws upon and promotes the linguistic turn in social theory that brings to the fore the discursive work at play in policy texts and their fabrication of certain issues as problems and responses as solutions. This is examined through approaches drawing on discourse analysis wherein it is not simply policy texts themselves, but also the realm of policy analysis itself which becomes an object of study in the truths of policy inscribed by particular approaches to policy analysis. In other words, policy analysis is itself part of the object of study and not separate from it. Policy analysis is part of practices through which policy is fabricated as an object of study. It therefore needs to be discursively reflexive of the work it does, rather than treating policy as independent of the practices through which it is studied. Through discourse analysis, analysts of policy can focus upon the way in which forms of practices of policy analysis are complicit in the constitution of policy and education objects and problems in particular ways which powerfully shape both policy and education.

### **Discursive Analysis**

Much policy analysis assumes a realist epistemology. Even forms of ideology critique have this assumption; it is the uncovering of the real behind the ideological which is the task of analysis. Indeed many of the attempts to draw upon discourse analysis still seek the safe harbour of realism. In realist analyses, the descriptions in policy texts are taken as literal rather than there being an examination of

the metaphorical work they do in fabricating and representing “the real”. Yet factual and fictional stories share many of the same kinds of textual devices for constructing credible descriptions, building plausible or unusual event sequences, attending to causes and consequences, agency and claim, character and circumstance (Edwards, 1997, p. 263).

For those interested in examining discourse as social action, it is the capacity for story telling which is posited as central to human ontology. In telling tales, tales are told, some of which are more telling than others. Thus, for instance, Potter (1996, p. 107) refers to a discourse which is constructing versions of the world as solid and factual as reifying discourse. Reifying means to turn something abstract into a material thing; and this is the sense I wish to emphasize, although material should be understood very widely.

Fact construction can be seen as a process of attempting to “reify” the world as real and solid through particular forms of discourse, something with which we are familiar in policy documents which authoritatively state the problems to be addressed as “facts” (Nicoll, 1998). For Potter (1996, p. 181) all discourse can be studied for its rhetorical and constructive work. This is as true for policy as it is for other areas. A part of such a reading entails examining the way texts work though presenting certain descriptions of the world as real, even though the world may be able to be described differently.

A metaphor is a term from one field that is used in another, often to illuminate the familiar in an unfamiliar way. The use of metaphor is a form of conceptual mapping that is crucial to the synchronic fabrication and diachronic development of meaning.

Parts of such mappings are so entrenched in everyday thought and language that we do not consciously notice them; other parts strike us as novel and creative. The term metaphor is often applied to the latter, highlighting the literary and poetic aspects of the phenomenon. (Fauconnier, 1997, p. 18)

To think of policy texts as literary and poetic may seem absurd, but it is precisely through an exploration of their textuality and narrative strategies that I believe fresh insights can be developed. The reasons for this become clear when we think of the

distinction between the literal and the metaphorical and the implications of reading policy as literal when it might be more productively read as metaphorical. As Potter (1996, p. 180) suggests “literal descriptions may be just telling it how it is, while metaphorical ones are doing something sneaky”. The distinction is important as

someone may discount a description as ‘only a metaphor’; or build it up as ‘quite literally’ the case; and this can be an important topic for study. Indeed the literal-metaphorical distinction is hard to keep separate from the factual-fictional distinction. (Potter, 1996, p. 181).

What this suggests is that in the fabrication and reading of texts there are attempts to deploy metaphorical and literal strategies to engender certain effects and meanings as opposed to others. Partly, and depending on the reading, this is related to the fabrication of “facts”. This is not to equate the literal with the factual or the metaphorical with the fictional in some common sense manner. Rather it forces us to consider the textual strategies at play in constructing certain things as facts and others as fictions.

the literal/metaphorical distinction is particularly important . . . it is employed, for example, in drawing a distinction between serious and non-serious writing, academic and colloquial language, research and poetry, where, in each case, the former, truer, more referential medium is legitimised partly by the extent to which it manages to exorcise metaphor from its modes of expression. (Parker, 1997, p. 84)

Here the most powerful metaphors might be said to be those which hide their own work by making metaphor appear to be an illegitimate part of a text. In this situation, metaphorical readings become disruptive of the literality of texts.

Metaphor opens potentialities of understanding rather than fixing understanding detrimentally and uniquely. A metaphor is permanently an opening for re-reading, re-interpretation . . . (Parker, 1997, p. 84)

Prior acceptance of a metaphorical description leads to what has been termed “vassalage” (Potter 1996, p. 99). The word has been used in relation to the work of the researcher in social science but it might equally be drawn upon in relation to realist readings of policy:

These sorts of tangles that result in vassalage are not restricted to work on scientific facts, although they are vividly apparent with that topic. In any area where factual versions of some group are taken as a start point for analysis the analyst may end up as a vassal. (Potter, 1996, pp. 98-9)

In opening up policy analysis as a metaphorical space I hope to counter such vassalage, although aware that such readings can also be done of the arguments put forward in this text and assumptions and metaphors through which it has been fabricated.

I am suggesting therefore that policy texts and policy analysis both depend upon metaphorical descriptions of the world through which their representations of reality are worked up. Analysis of the ways in which policy propositions and their critiques are formed and reified through such processes therefore become important, as any common acceptance of metaphorical systems may circumscribe critical engagement. Reflexive consideration of these issues may enable forms of critique which refuse or counter practices of reification by drawing deliberately upon alternative metaphors and systems. Thus, the politics of language is not about the uncovering of the truth behind ideology, but the fabricating of alternative metaphorical complexes.

### **Metaphorical Work of Lifelong Learning in Policy**

I have indicated in broad terms the argument for a discursive approach to policy analysis and in particular the potential of metaphorical readings of policy and the use of metaphor in the rhetorics of policy. In this section, I wish to briefly illustrate this in relation to a particular policy on lifelong learning recently published by the UK government - the White Paper (Secretary of State of Education and Employment, 1999). What follows then is an illustrative examination of the way in which this text works though presenting certain descriptions of the world as real, even though the world may be able to be described differently: What metaphorical

and literal strategies are deployed to engender certain effects and meanings as opposed to others? What “facts” are fabricated in this?

The beginning sentence of the *Preface* to the document returns to an earlier Green Paper “In the Green Paper *The Learning Age* we set out our vision of how lifelong learning could enable us to fulfill our potential and cope” (Secretary of State of Education and Employment, 1999, p. 3). Here, at the very beginning of the White Paper “lifelong learning” is presented as an already present material object. “[O]ur vision” is a description of some “thing”, to be taken quite literally as already present. Having been presented powerfully in this way, lifelong learning is then the premise upon which the document as a whole can unfold “naturally.” It is the shared vision upon which, if it is “ours,” then the rest of the text may appear rational and logical. “Lifelong learning” then, is a reifying discourse in that it is constructed as solid and factual, whilst at the same time its acceptance as fact makes space for the changes then suggested.

However, lifelong learning is not only reified and reifying in that it is presented as factual, it is premised upon a description of a particular kind of world which is also reified. The world described is one of “rapid economic and social change”. This description is presented as quite literally the case. Because it is presented in this way, it does not require to be questioned. In this move the social construction of the world described is masked, as its materiality is emphasised. “Lifelong learning” takes a place in this document as a metaphor that governs through its reifying work—work to not only reify itself, but the facticity of a world of “rapid economic and social change”.

“Lifelong learning” does more even than this within this initial section of the text. It presents everyone with a “challenge” with which they must “cope”, and a need “to fulfill their potential”. Here the description of the world is a “problem” to which we “must” respond. There is no scope left here for individual choice as “everyone” is to be included. However, the text that follows “seduces” us by offering, across a range of discourses, descriptions of the sorts of aims for education to which we commonly ascribe.

Lifelong learning can enable people to play a full part in developing their talent, the potential of their family, and the capacity of the

community in which they live and work. It can and must nurture a love for learning. This will ensure the means by which our economy can make a successful transition from the industries and services of the past, to the knowledge and information economy of the future. It also contributes to sustaining a civilised and cohesive society, in which people develop as active citizens and in which generational disadvantage can be overcome. (ibid.)

“Lifelong learning” is seductive in that it subsumes all education and training into the service of goals representing a range of discourses already at play; humanism, liberalism and the market putting in question the existing interests and assumptions about institutional structures, curricula and pedagogy. It troubles the spaces of existing practices through opening a space in which specific questions are then asked as to the effectiveness of those practices in achieving specific goals. To entice us to collusion we are told that this view has already been “widely supported”, and so “confirmed” the government’s own view that change was necessary. In so doing the inherent worthwhileness of “the traditional” within education and training in supporting lifelong learning and its patent “failure” is exposed to scrutiny. In this sense lifelong learning is not only a policy goal, and policy arena, but works as a strategy to trouble the spaces of educational and training practices through the constitution of a problem.

This in itself is not unambiguous, as the harnessing of support for reform sits uncomfortably alongside a metaphorical complex which suggests that lifelong learning is the solution to “the facts” of the contemporary world. Here lifelong learning is posited as a necessary adaptive response to the contemporary condition, without which we fail to fulfill our potential and cope. Thus, it enables us to accept that to stand still is not feasible. In the government’s White Paper:

Standing still is not an option. The world has changed and the current systems and structures are real obstacles to success. Our aims can only be achieved through new arrangements at national and local level which build on the strengths, and eliminate the weaknesses, of the present arrangements. (ibid., p. 15)

We find that lifelong learning has been adopted both at the national and supra-national levels as a framework for policy and practice, increasingly with the espoused normative goal of supporting the development of a learning society, where the latter is primarily, though not solely, framed within human capital theory.

The challenge we face to equip individuals, employers and the country to meet the demands of the 21st century is immense and immediate. In the information and knowledge based economy, investment in human capital – in the intellect and creativity of people – is replacing past patterns of investment in plant, machinery and physical labour. (ibid., p. 12).

Here, the goal is of enabling individuals to look after themselves in conditions of uncertainty through a process of “adaptability”, a Darwinian metaphorical complex.

Darwin’s view was that it is the “fittest” who will tend to survive. Populations survive if their genetic pool is diverse enough to provide the genes that give the required advantage in contexts of continuous environmental change. Both populations and individuals require adaptability for survival over the short and long term. This view of populations in competition with each other for survival that has become “naturalised” – as social Darwinism – and can be found in the texts of lifelong learning. “To continue to compete, we must equip ourselves . . . and develop the adaptability to respond to change” (ibid., p. 12). This resonates with well with social Darwinism, and acts convincingly in that this is already a commonly held description of the social. Lifelong learning is then powerfully presented within a dominant view of the social.

In a sense then, a discourse like this seeks to promote the very thing which is said to be lacking – a culture of lifelong learning. The new age of lifelong learning therefore seems to be conducive to a type of new age discourse, wherein the harnessing of emotions, attitudes and values displaces the requirement for rigorous argument, evidence and debate. A set of assertions on the desirability and necessity for lifelong learning is posited as both the way to succeed, and in a way which is consistent with this aim, a position inscribed in the title of the text – *Learning to Succeed*.

The affective dimensions to the discourses of lifelong learning are not in themselves surprising, for as Ball (1998, p. 124) suggests “policies are both systems of values and symbolic systems . . . policies are articulated both to achieve material effects and to manufacture support for those effects”. An effective policy would appear therefore to be one which is affective. It is an appeal which is appealing to many educators, employers as others. Questions remain as to what forms of learning by whom, when and where have these effects, and whether such effects can be identified as the outcomes of learning, lifelong or otherwise. In what senses does learning help us to succeed, and how? What sense does the new age of lifelong learning make when we put the claims for it alongside some of the more rigorous analyses of contemporary change, in particular changes in the nature and availability of paid employment?

### **Implications**

This paper has been intended as a contribution to debates that suggest that there can be productive engagements with post-structuralist theory among adult educators. In particular, it points to ways of engaging in policy analysis that move beyond the realism of much existing literature. “Lifelong learning”, as presented within the policy text that has been analysed here, is presented literally as a vision that must be achieved if we are to succeed. Through this, there are textual strategies at play that work up the facticity of lifelong learning and a particular view of the present and future world. They work up this facticity by working effectively and affectively upon those who read this text, or read or hear similar texts elsewhere. In this there are attempts to deploy literal strategies to engender certain descriptions of the world and our actions in response to it, as both fact and necessity. In the context of the globalisation of policies for lifelong learning this kind of discursive approach to the policy texts of lifelong learning can open up the mobilisations of meaning at play in policy in a systematic and productive way.

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