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Kim Niewolny
Cornell University, USA

Arthur Wilson
Cornell University, USA

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Economic Knowledge Production of the Growing New Farmers Consortium, 2000-2005: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Adult Agricultural Education

Kim Niewolny and Arthur Wilson
Cornell University, USA

Abstract: This study is a critical discourse analysis of adult education material developed by the Growing New Farmers Consortium (GNFC) from 2000 through 2005. Findings illustrate GNFC's role in (re)producing the privileged tradition of neoliberal marketization existing more broadly in adult agricultural education.

Problem and Purpose

It is not news that industrialized/globalized agricultural discourses have dominated agriculture education policies and programs in the United States since the early nineteenth century, first in the economic and technology rhetoric of public institutions of agricultural research and education and more recently in the private sector's emphasis on transnational productivity and efficiency (Kloppenborg, 1991; Lyson, 2004). For the last thirty years there has also been an intensifying emergence of discourses about alternative agriculture that opposes the increasing, rationalized and industrialized system of agricultural practice and policy (Allen, 2004). These counter-discourses are informed by a body of "sustainability" scholarship promoting the "creation of an alternative knowledge system that functions, largely, but not exclusively outside of the formal institutions of agricultural research and at the local level" (Hassanein, 1999, p. 6).

Our interest in the impact of tensions between industrialized and alternative agro-food discourses on the programs and policies of adult agricultural education is framed by the recent surfacing of new farmer education at the center of this hegemonic struggle. In this paper we consider a portion of findings from a larger research project seeking to understand the cultural identities and practices of new farmer education within the specific context of the Growing New Farmers Consortium (GNFC), an alliance of agricultural organizations responsible for the adult education of new farmers in the northeastern region of the United States (Niewolny, 2007). The GNFC was developed in 2000 as a critical response to rising concerns about a lack of farmers entering into agriculture as large numbers were exiting. In response, various organizations assembled to develop programs and policies intended for new farmers and the service providers who work with them to reduce the risk of losing the agricultural resource base in the Northeast. According to Ruhf (2001), this collaboration project comprises a unique partnership of grassroots organizations, land-grant universities, private research institutes, and federal and state departments of agriculture that signifies a shift in the design and dissemination of adult agricultural education by including the often ignored issues of sustainability (Bird & Ikerd, 1993). Particularly, the GNFC's adult education material addresses educational and political opportunities that focus on improving access to markets, capital and credit, hands-on training, and farmland for small-farm, organic, transitional, and large-scale commodity interests (Sheils & Descartes, 2004).

Given that the GNFC has positioned itself rhetorically as an "alternative" to traditional extension education, this study examines the GNFC as a contested space in adult agricultural education at a time when neoliberal and scientific knowledge production continues to influence

the direction of agricultural research, education, and policy towards industrialized/globalized ends (Allen, 2004; Hassanein, 1999; Kloppenburg, 1991; Lyson, 2004). Located in this context, we argue that the GNFC is actually a seedbed for differing value systems and struggles for power. The purpose of the research is to examine how the GNFC constitutes and reinforces “certain knowledges and truths” (Liepins, 1996, p. 3) of agriculture intended for new farmer education. In particular, we aim to understand how the GNFC establishes and maintains power relations that legitimate who can be a new farmer and how such farmers can/should practice agriculture. With this paper we illustrate how the GNFC is a collaboration of adult agricultural education entities who reproduce neoliberal marketization ideology that is influential in promoting one dimension of industrialized/globalized agro-food discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This study rests on social theories of discourse informed by Fairclough (1992) and Foucault (1972). A key assumption is that discourse and language are linked together and to wider social structures by taking into account the constitutive features of discourse and the heterogeneous and historicized nature of texts (Foucault, 1972), and the concrete instances of textual, discursive practice, and social practice dimensions of discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Borrowing from Luke (1995, p. 10), this theoretical perspective bridges the “macro approaches to discourse” with specific “micro” elements of textual analysis to analyze educational texts critically. Discourse theory in this vein also draws upon neo-Marxist perspectives of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), cultural perspectives of identity-making (Hall, 1990; Grossberg, 1996), and a critical interpretation of ideology (Eagleton, 1994; Hall, 1996). This work is further informed by the literature on agricultural discourse and power, including neoliberal agricultural discourse (Liepins & Bradshaw, 1999), the dynamics of agricultural media and knowledge production (Liepins, 1996), and agro-food discourse construction (Allen, 2004).

Methodology and Research Design

The methodological approach of the study is framed by the project of critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is an approach to discourse analysis used to explore “the linkages between discourse, ideology and power [that] may be unclear to those involved” with the intention of revealing the ways social inequality are (re)produced within the discourse event under study (Fairclough, 1995, p. 133). Three analytical tasks guided this CDA research. We examined *agriculture* and *new farmer* constructs embedded in adult education material of the GNFC; the discursive-ideological formations that textually construct their meanings; and the way these discursive meanings are perpetuated, contested, and/or co-opted in the material.

The data for the study were a selection of adult education program and policy material produced and/or distributed by GNFC member organizations from 2000 through 2005. In particular, the data included a large corpus of texts: program workbooks, newsletters, professional development documents, and reports and policy statements. A total of thirty-five texts were collected directly from the GNF Project website or through request from the GNFC member organizations themselves. According to Fairclough’s (1992) approach to CDA, each text was sorted into a different genre (i.e., workbook, newsletter, policy statement, professional development document). Following Luke (1995), we argue that the texts function in similar and differing ways according to their specific genre, yet all represent a practical and common agenda: they are meant to be adult education material for new farmers to engage in the practice of agriculture in the northeastern region of the United States.

Using Fairclough (1992) as our starting point, we incorporated textual, discursive practice, and social practice dimensions in the analysis of the corpus of texts. First, we made note of the analytical category “vocabulary” by analyzing recurring words/word meanings, metaphors, and exclusion/inclusion of words/meanings of *new farmer* and *agriculture* constructs. This level of analysis addresses what Fairclough (pp. 236-237) calls the “lexical” and “thematic” ways in which social actors and practices are constituted through the symbolic presentation of subject positions and practices in texts. Second, we investigated the notion of “interdiscursivity.” Interdiscursivity is informed by Foucault’s (1972) concept of orders of discourse and used here to reveal prevailing discursive-ideological formations that are drawn upon to textually construct agricultural meanings in the texts. Finally, we included an analysis of the “social matrix of discourse” (Fairclough, 1992) to examine how the GNFC’s agricultural discourse functions in terms of larger and historical political interests in support of and in resistance to concepts and strategies of industrialization discourse.

Findings

We present here one key finding of the larger study (Niewolny, 2007): the GNFC’s role in (re)producing the neoliberal marketization ideology (Fairclough, 1995) in texts of adult agricultural education. According to Lyson (2004) and others (see Allen, 2004; Liepins & Bradshaw, 1999), one of the key mechanisms for the increasing industrialized/globalized agro-food regime is the persistent reiteration of a neoliberal economic world-view in agricultural education and policy, particularly the circulation of the neoliberal values of profitability and efficiency. We argue that the saturation of such neoliberal logic in the corpus of texts demonstrates the manifestation of “industrial identities” to be taken-up and translated for the purpose of new farmer education as it is articulated by the GNFC.

There are several discursive factors that indicate how the GNFC (re)produces a version of neoliberalism in the texts. First, we found that texts through their vocabulary and its lexical use projected meanings of *agriculture* that reinforce a decisively economic portrayal of new farm practice through the thematic aspects of classifying the agricultural experience as a business, promoting free-market business activity or enterprise selection, serving the agricultural economic sector, supporting agribusiness interests and values, legitimating large-scale production-oriented practices, normalizing the farm as an economic unit, and reinforcing an already prevailing market-focused relationship between farmers and farm property. For instance, we found evidence of economic knowledge production through an analysis of the lexical and thematic items *industry* and *agricultural marketing*. The lexical item *industry* is prominent in programs and works to textually build a set of “beliefs” about how free-market values will benefit agricultural activity and relationships, a theme that is seen throughout the corpus of texts. Brumfield’s (2005) program booklet, for example, is laden with excerpts about the importance of learning commodity-oriented marketing practices that invoke a neoliberal portrayal of new farm practice:

The growth of mass-market sales and national brands has encouraged specialization and price competition. For many years, much of the poultry industry has used contracts where farmers produce for one large supplier. The pork industry has moved to contract production in recent years. In the greenhouse industry, large producers and processors are expanding by vertical integration and mergers. (p. 40)

This market-driven image of agricultural practice also affects the portrayal of the ideal new farmer/learner. We found that texts discursively constitute the new farmer subject as a

member of the next generation of “producers,” a neoliberal economic representation of the new farmer whose role in society is to remain competitive in a continuously adjusting agricultural market. In particular, the GNFC legitimates meanings that textually constrain new farmers to economic roles, privilege learning managerial activities over other practices, and subordinate farmers/learners to agricultural experts in passages containing the lexical item *new farmer* in intersection with the recurring themes *commercial entity*, *self-employed*, *customer*, and *expertise*. Reading program texts, for example, we learned that the depiction of the new farmer as a commercial entity comes through strongly in passages where the language restricts educational needs of farmers to those that intersect with the dual goals of economic competitiveness and profitability through explicit and implicit reference to the lexical item *new farmer*. Specifically, the texts appear to constrain the new farmer to an economic role when authors provide planning advice for entrepreneurial opportunities in commercial agriculture. In these instances, the authors express how new farmer programs “help agricultural business operators (and future business operators) decide which enterprise is best for them to pursue with a full fledged business plan” (Richards, 2004, p. 4).

Second, drawing upon the notion of interdiscursivity, we revealed how the GNFC’s articulation of neoliberal motifs draws upon a wider set of discourses concerning efficiency, regulations, and commodity production embedded widely across the corpus of texts. The discourse of economic efficiency, for instance, was associated with the need for new farmers to learn how to operate fiscally efficient businesses, at the farm level as well as in the wider socioeconomic milieu in which farms operate. The representation of new farmer education here places the goal of efficiency on the new farmer as a learner of agriculture: “You can specialize in fewer items. While you may want to reduce your risks by diversifying, you also want to concentrate on a few enterprises so you can do each one well and have efficiencies of production” (Brumfield, 2005, p. 26). What stands out in this discourse, therefore, is the need for new farmers to be efficient with their resources and assets to become successful competitors in the agricultural marketplace. Relatedly, other authors emphasize how new farmers need to learn the skill of balancing marketing and production practices in the “most cost-efficient manner” (New Jersey Farm Link, 2003, p. 14).

Third, we learned that there are different levels of social organization that have an effect on economic relations of power and struggle within the GNFC: the social process of text production, the social context of text dissemination, and the wider societal context of industrialization on adult agricultural education. Our analysis of the “social matrix of discourse” illustrates how the GNFC’s construction and presentation of neoliberalism can be construed as a particular discursive practice of the larger process of industrialization (see Allen, 2004; Hassanein, 1999; Liepins & Bradshaw, 1999; Lyson, 2004). For example, we found that a stable assemblage of organizations and texts reinforces neoliberal beliefs and tightly holds together one dimension of industrialization discourse. Particularly, we argue that the saturation of market ideology across the corpus of texts demonstrates the manifestation of “industrial identities” to be taken-up and practiced by new farmers as learners of agriculture, thereby placing business and industry as the designers of new farm curriculum. In this light, with regard to the larger industrialization regime, the GNFC appears to articulate prevailing, economic meanings and knowledge that are translated and put into practice for the purpose of new farmer education.

Conclusion and Implications for Adult Education Theory/Practice

We have argued that the GNFC’s adult education materials are a discursive vehicle that sustain and circulate economic relations of power that produce authority and identity structures

that privilege neoliberal ends. These findings not only emphasize where powerful market-oriented principles are discursively located in texts of adult agricultural education, but also how such dominant cultural meanings are put into practice for the purpose of new farmer education as it is articulated by the GNFC. The results provide the necessary groundwork to “see” how the GNFC “is a culturally constructed sector where influential political and economic philosophies can become naturalized and hence taken as ‘truth’” (Liepins & Bradshaw, 1999, p. 577). In this way, the research sheds light on the ways in which the GNFC perpetuates and reinforces a key economic ideology existing more broadly in adult agricultural education and policy.

According to Cervero and Wilson (2001, p. 12), “[a]dult education’s particular role in history can be seen as a struggle for knowledge, which is interwoven with the struggle for power. These struggles are the engines that drive and define adult education and are central to practice on the ground.” Following in this tradition, we argue that the study provides insight into the ways in which the adult education of the GNFC is much more than “bearers” of content; instead, it acts as a medium for the (re)production of the cultural context of “industrialization” through the reiteration of neoliberal marketization ideology. It is through articulating these relationships of power that we are able to do two things. First, we can clearly trace where neoliberal meanings are assembled and how they are disseminated through various collaborations of organizations and texts of adult education and policy. Second, we can begin to question and challenge this privileged tradition by reconstituting the language and logic of agriculture constructed in adult education circles towards more “sustainable” ends. In this light, the research provides the conceptual footing for others to recognize adult education’s role in perpetuating hegemonic relations and struggles that too often privileges the global elite at the expense of the farmer/learner. By revealing these connections within the GNFC, we can begin to identify, challenge, and transform the power imbalances, expanding the boundaries of what constitutes meaningful and equitable programming and policy for “new kinds” of farmers/learners.

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