

## DOMINANT DISCOURSES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

### Postmodernism and the Dominant Modes of Intellection

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#### Introduction

This paper consists of two parts. In Part A, some of the dominant discourses on distance education are briefly identified and discussed. While there are several dominant discourses in contemporary distance education, this paper argues that policy making is generally influenced by what Finlay (1987: 336-337) implied was a disintegrated, a priori, positivist and reaffirming paradigm. This type of paradigm necessarily presents decision makers with a limited number of options. Given the opinion that such limited options need to be expanded, an alternative discursive paradigm for distance education policy making is proposed. This alternative places distance education within its specific social context.

Part B contains a report of a current research project aimed at identifying the influences of the dominant discourses in policy making in distance education in Australia since 1988. A brief description of the case study methodology utilised in the project is presented together with a set of experimental questions and related hypotheses.

#### PART A

##### Distance Education

Distance education can be defined as a formal learning situation in which the learner is remote from the teacher. It is also a learning situation which implies the formal organisation and dissemination of coursework material, and a criteria based assessment of student achievement by an educational institution (cf. Rumble, 1989). This institutional involvement distinguishes distance education from other forms of education at a distance, such as teach-yourself-methods, home or self study. In an attempt to characterise the more salient elements of distance education, Rumble (1989) emphasised that distance education also implied the presence of well defined curricula, the physical separation of teacher and learner for the majority of learning time, and the belief by distance educators that within a curriculum and instructional framework, the process of distance education can be compatible with both educational content and learning context.

Distance education provides a rapidly growing alternative to the more traditional on-campus education which had been a feature of the educational profile of higher education in many countries. In many cases, distance education is the only viable means by which a student can access higher education. Considering the pressures placed on higher education institutions as a result of political factors such as 'unmet demand', and economic factors such as calls to improve the cost effectiveness of on-

campus education through mixed mode delivery, the various influences on policy development in distance education deserve close critical analysis. A critical analysis of recent developments in distance education is essential in the light of increasing enrolments in distance education courses in higher education institutions in Australia and worldwide.

Jean-Francois Lyotard's book, *A Report on Knowledge: The Post-modern Condition* (1986) provides a key to developing a healthy cynicism toward the current epistemological foundations which underpin contemporary distance education. According to Lyotard (1986), the dominant bodies of knowledge within society have some credence only because of the existence of 'metanarratives', those quintessential ideas which combine to form a reasoned exposition which is accepted by the majority of people as a viable explanation of the status quo. The critical analysis of both the reasoned expositions and their residual metanarratives is the essence of a postmodern critique (cf. Lyotard, 1986). However, as implied by Lyotard, contemporary society is also characterised by the decline in the authority of metanarratives which has also produced a decline in certainty with regard to those metanarratives which previously gave authority to the dominant ways of knowing. This situation has created an ideological vacuum (cf. Bell, 1974), a situation which has the potential to allow hitherto less dominant metanarratives to assert their influence. However, if no new metanarratives arise in contemporary society to supplant the displaced metanarratives, from an ideological standpoint, it could be said that postmodern society is characterised by incertitude.

Lyotard's postmodernism bears some allegiance to the oeuvre of Michel Foucault, especially his work on the concept of discourse. For Foucault, discourse was essentially a mode of knowing produced by a range of social, political and economic institutions which allowed certain things to be said and other things to remain unsaid. Yet, one must ask on whose authority does a discourse speak? According to what criteria does discourse attach importance to some events while simultaneously or alternatively discrediting others? Questions such as those posed above underpin the problems associated with the identification and interpretation of discourses in distance education.

Foucault (1970, 1972, 1980) argued that in order to reveal the power and authority by which a discourse proclaims itself, it was necessary to exorcise from within the discourse any trace of metaphysics, in his terms, its logophobia. For Foucault, while power is resident in all discourses, within a social structure, power must be interpreted in the context of the influence of external restraints. These restraining influences appear as agents of exclusion in the form of a set of rules determining what can and cannot be said by discourse (cf. White, 1979: 92-93).

According to Foucault, people existed as elements of discursive formations - in the context of this paper, particular developments in distance education policy since 1988. However, Foucault (1980) implied that discursive formations were only surface structures and that at a deeper level, it was possible to uncover the system of relations and knowledge which gave rise to particular ways of knowing. Foucault, for example, described the 'apparatus of sexuality' as a system of relations.

It was a:

... thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions, in short, the said as much as the unsaid (194). Foucault's description of the apparatus of sexuality above may well be applicable to a variety of other social phenomena, including the 'apparatus' of distance education.

In the context of the work of Foucault and Lyotard, it is prudent to recognise both the restrictive and compelling nature of the discourses in distance education and to recognise that the various endorsements or rejections of positions contained in discourses on distance education relate to the larger social context. In order to move beyond what Finlay (1987) implied was a traditional paradigm, a traditional mode of knowing based on a priori contextualisations in distance education, it is advisable to first identify some of the issues which currently impact on distance education. The influence of these issues are at the root of contemporary discourses in distance education.

#### Key Issues in Distance Education Policy

The set of underlying rationales which presently characterise policy development in distance education are implicitly underpinned by either technological, political, economic or socially determined decisions. In contrast, the influence of an educational rationale as the basis for decision making in distance education policy is marginal.

Several reasons can be offered to explain this paradox of the marginal influence of an educational rationale in an enterprise that is essentially an educational endeavour. In some sense, Australia can be considered a unique case in the development of distance education. Both historical and contemporary influences in Australia do not closely mirror the influences operating on the development of distance education in either Europe, North America or in developing nations. There is strong evidence to suggest that particular political, economic and social influences combine to make Australia a unique case [1].

From a general perspective, the development of distance education in Australia has been significantly influenced by macro-factors such as supply and demand; equality of access; political obligation; national priorities; and the diversity of the client group. At the micro-level, factors such as the availability of human resources within particular institutions and the level of research and development in the field has also affected distance education.

In the light of these influences, educational factors per se have been marginalised in the development of distance education policy. In this interpretation, the quality of teaching and learning, the quality of the instructional materials being utilised, the educational implications related to questions of process and context and the general educational outcomes related to the use of various technologies tend to become secondary considerations in policy development. The result is that

although distance education is essentially an educational endeavour, it is formulated primarily on the basis of non-educational considerations. Several austere examples of the marginalisation of educational factors in distance education are offered below.

### The Issue of Technology

The literature in the field reveals an emphasis on modes of delivery. This focus on delivery can be interpreted as a measure of the extent to which technology is the driving force behind distance education. Since the early 1980s, the Australian government has directly funded development of sophisticated delivery technologies including video-conferencing, broadcast television and audio graphics. This overt action has seen a substantial growth in the use of various technologies by those universities designated as distance education providers.

However, the literature also identifies a gap between the theoretical base and the application of technology. Much of the literature concerned with technological developments in distance education treat technology in a vacuum, without critical consideration for political or social concerns, let alone any serious treatment or analysis of educational implications of technological developments in, and for, distance education.

In terms of institutional providers, there is a gap between those who are involved with sophisticated technology, and those who maintain an interest in educational issues. As technology continues to be developed and applied to distance education, the decisions made by 'technocrats' (cf. Bell; 1976) will be at odds with alternative decisions arrived at by other processes. The influence of technocratic decision making is also evident in the research base of distance education. It is not unusual, for example, to find that in terms of internal research grants, institutions favour technologically based research proposals in distance education as opposed to proposals that are oriented toward more social or educational outcomes.

### The Issue of Politics

With respect to the influence of politics on decision making in distance education policy, the changing nature of the client group in Australia has a number of political implications. The present demographic indicator pertaining to a distance education identifies the average distance education student as being female, married and urban dwelling. This stands in contrast to the typical student of the 1970s who was male, employed in the workforce and living in a rural area.

Such demographic factors, coupled with the large number of unemployed school leavers in both urban and rural settings, has led to what may be termed the age of politically expedient decision making in distance education. The use of satellite broadcasting as a medium for delivery of university courses through the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, has its rationale in politics and economics as much as in education.

The notion of 'unmet demand', a phrase generated from within the

Office of the Federal Minister of Education, characterises that group of school leavers who are unable to obtain university places. This existence of this group has also influenced decision making in distance education. For example, the recently mooted 'open learning television channel' proposed for Australia is an example of an expedient economic response by distance education providers in order to meet the needs of a group whose existence has strong political implications for the government of the day.

### The Issue of Economics

There is no definitive research to indicate the relationship between new technology and the teaching-learning process in terms of cognitive and affective outcomes. In these circumstances, economic concerns such as cost effectiveness become the criteria for determining the use of existing and new technology. This emphasis on cost effectiveness, coupled with the ramifications of the delivery metaphor, is conducive to a particularly linear type of curriculum structure. In turn, this structure has several implications for both teaching and learning.

Scales of economy also influence the development of distance education policy in Australia. Those institutions with large scale decision making powers will more likely than not look to the cost effectiveness factor first; in other words, to deal with the most number of students in the cheapest way possible - almost a mass production of knowledge in the age of 'mass education'. Other factors will likely focus on the need to keep up with 'the information revolution' and to utilise new technological developments. In the eyes of the decision makers, the two main questions regarding any delivery system are likely to remain 'what does it do?' and 'how much does it cost?'; accountability in these respects becomes very significant.

In an increasingly complex world, and in a situation where the trend has been toward more decision making by what may be regarded as non-experts in the field, it is easy to see how modern technology appears to be the only attractive, quick and cost effective means of addressing large scale educational objectives. It is also easy to see how pedagogical implications can be reduced to nothing more than an afterthought in such a process.

### The Social Issues

Access and equity issues have exerted a considerable amount of influence in the recent development of distance education policy in Australia (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1986, 1988, 1990). However, as King has pointed out, while Australian distance educators share a general consensus that the development of distance education programs has to do with access and equity issues, with enabling students who, for one reason or another, were denied access to conventional means of education, that this is not necessarily the reason why institutions are involved in distance education. Often the reasons behind distance education endeavours involves a threat to the continued existence of programs or even institutions rather than a commitment to principles of

social justice (Evans & King, 1991).

### The Limiting Paradigm

It is argued that the implicit determinism of economics, politics, technology and social issues in distance education policy can be identified in the discourses on distance education, and that the influence of educational discourses on distance education will be marginalised when compared to other dominant discourses. The analysis of these discourses should reveal the dominance of economic, political, social and technologically determined decisions over educationally determined decisions in the development and implementation of distance education policy.

However, given the social construction of distance education decision making, such discussions and the resulting decisions will tend to be characterised by reaffirmations of the status quo (cf. Finlay, 1987).

### The Alternative Discursive Paradigm

The alternative discursive paradigm offers an alternative to the limiting paradigm's influence in the decision making processes in distance education. The traditional limiting paradigm reflects methodological weaknesses and contains epistemological tenets that may bring into question their consistency, even their social and political legitimacy. This approach has been elucidated upon and applied by Finlay (1987) in her critique of the new communications technology. For Finlay, traditional approaches are characterised by a lack of integration of techniques, functions and issues, and maintain a strict empiricist and a-historical stance. Traditional approaches are also characterised by the idealisation of the object or idea of study to an abstraction which is far removed from its concrete context which is formative of both its applications and structure. Traditional approaches also contain a priori assumptions regarding context, and typically offer positivist claims to objectivity; often, there is no theoretical framework by which to judge the validity and consistency of various statements and positions taken. Other characteristics of traditional approaches include the tendency to reaffirm the status quo while making no attempt to reflect upon the limits of their own critical discourse.

Finlay's alternate approach involves an integrated view based on a common denominator of discourse, and an epistemology based on discourse, with an emphasis on the belief that 'facts' are discursively manifest. This approach attempts to develop a contextual theory regarding the object or idea under study, where it is judged within specific contexts; in this regard, there is a recognition of the need for historical contextualisation as well, to acknowledge the constant shifting of context. There is an attempt to identify the dominant forces of power and social control, and criticism of the status quo is accompanied by the postulation of an alternate set of practices. Rather than making claims to objectivity, this approach recognises that all theory, including positivism, is value laden or linked to ideology and that these values should be exposed. Finally,

there is an ongoing attempt with this approach to be aware of the limitations of one's own particular discourse.

## Conclusion Part A

It is proposed that an alternative approach such as the discursive approach implied by Finlay is the best method of determining the dominant discourses in contemporary Australian distance education.

## PART B

### Holistic Approaches in the Analysis of Discourses in Distance Education Policy Making

The study of discourses in distance education utilises an holistic approach to understanding people, rather than a particularistic means of analysing human actions by adding together similar traits and behaviours - a typical approach in orthodox survey work. While a survey method, such as that suggested by Warwick and Lininger (1975: 9), has been utilised in the study as a means of gathering data, the bulk of the research data has been gathered using ethnographic techniques similar to those advocated by van Manen (1989). The purpose of such an ethnographic approach is to see people as the sum total of the influences which surround them.

The case study approach to discourses in distance education includes library research, in-depth interviews, nonparticipant observation and qualitative analysis, supported in part by quantitative analysis and the utilisation of a key informant methodology as used in social anthropology is a most appropriate means to gather data. The case study approach extends to include the analysis of material based on a combination of observations, interviews, questionnaires, already published research and books, and other documentary and statistical information.

The work of Mitchell (1983) on the case study approach supports its use in the context of the particular focus of this study. Mitchell pointed out that 'the validity of case studies depends on logical rather than statistical inference'. Consequently, for Mitchell, criticism resting on the opinion that a sample was unrepresentative of a certain population in distance education are partly misguided (Mitchell, 1983: 188f207). Mitchell implied that conclusions and observations which are structured around logical references and inferences were also valid.

To provide a range of data of the influences of the dominant discourses on distance education, a wide net has been cast. Certain individuals have been identified as having influenced or possessing the potential to influence distance education policy making. Such people include a professor of distance education, the Head of a large distance education centre, two 'policy makers' in distance education and two people in DEET responsible for policy decisions in distance education. It also seemed logical to review three mega-projects in distance education funded by DEET and two other projects which were not funded. It can be assumed that projects are funded because they reflect the dominant way of thinking in the area.

A review of written material and other publications was undertaken. This included a review of several policy documents in distance education, a review of the accepted body of literature relating to the field and a content analysis of representations of distance education in the print media. This latter analysis was included to provide an indication of distance education in popular discourse. A case study of a distance education provider was also included in order to emphasise the role of practice and to highlight the perspective of those engaged primarily in the provision of distance education.

This combination of data will provide discrete 'slices' of information which, when viewed together, will provide a holistic way of identifying the dominant discourses in distance education. The identification of the dominant discourses is also an identification of the dominant ways of knowing and the influence of these dominant modes of intellection on the development of distance education policy.

## Method

Discourse analysis is used as a method of finding meaning in any connected symbolic discursive form. The identification of structure in discourse involves seeking patterns of repetition within discourse, and analysing the relationship of these patterns not only to one another, but to the discourse as a whole. The establishment of privilege within a certain discourse or metanarrative, according to Lyotard, can be revealed through discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis studies the way in which objects or ideas are spoken about; on the one hand, there are empirical 'ideas', or 'objects', while on the other hand, there are discursive 'ideas' or 'objects'. The emphasis is not on content, but on 'how' it is said. Discourse analysis seek to uncover commonly recognised and accepted underlying rules or procedures. These common rules or procedures legitimating various statements across a wide diversity of statements will constitute a discourse. Obviously, some of these procedures have greater legitimacy than others.

In attempting to identify the dominant discourses in distance education, it is important to focus on what is said about distance education as well as on aspects of practice within the field. It is reasonable to expect that the hierarchical exclusivity of certain discourses will be uncovered. It should also be kept in mind that discourse itself is an interactive activity, a specific social practice. Some choice must be exercised in terms of the discourses to be studied before the study begins. The categories chosen for this particular study as described in Part A (economic, political, technological and social issues) are to a large extent categorised along traditional boundaries. However, the intention is to present them as a starting point. The discursive approach allows various discourses to be grouped together as 'issues' without categorising or organising them along traditional lines. The various case study sources will be grouped together as all provide examples of social discourse. An attempt will then be made to determine whether any continuities or irregularities exist among the various

discourses. To this end, a set of experimental questions and hypotheses are set out below.

#### Experimental Questions and Hypotheses

- E1 What are the dominant and less dominant discourses in distance education policy making in Australia since 1988?
- E2 What is the current relationship between distance education and society in the context of the existence of the 'traditional' and 'alternative' paradigms?
- E3 What were the aims and objectives of the successful Government projects on distance education since 1988?
- H1 That discourses on economics and technology will drive distance education decision making.
- H2 That educational discourses are marginalised in contemporary distance education policy making.
- H3 That projects which reflect the tenets of the dominant discourses in distance education will be more likely to be funded than projects which do not reflect the tenets of the dominant discourses regardless of the quality of the projects.

#### Conclusion

It would appear at this preliminary stage that the discursive approach has significant potential for uncovering the dominant discourses in contemporary Australian distance education.

#### NOTES

[1] the author acted as a consultant to a recent distance education project, providing a summary of current literature in the field which later formed part of a larger report entitled: Open Learning, Communications Technology and Educational Outcomes: A Report to the Australian Education Council Working Party on a National Education Communication Framework. Edith Cowan University & the University of Southern Queensland, February 1992.

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