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Getting at the facts: the fabrication of truth and action within lifelong learning policy

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Introduction
This paper seeks to extend work previously published that points to the importance of rhetorical analysis to policy studies. It considers the rhetorical work of policy and makes the suggestion that we may fruitfully pay some attention to the work of rhetoric in our own formulations. For me, rhetorical analysis helps to point to a politics of discourse at play in policy and its analysis. By exploring the detail of rhetoric, in this case of two UK government’s policy texts of lifelong learning from the late 1990s, alternative possibilities for the fabrication of truth and action may be encountered. This paper points to some of the conceptual resources upon which one can draw in undertaking rhetorical deconstructions of policy texts and discourses, in this case, of lifelong learning, and one’s own role as rhetorician.

We are in a new age—the age of information and of global competition. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. The types of jobs we do have changed as have the industries in which we work and the skills they need. At the same time, new opportunities are opening up and we see the potential of new technologies to change our lives for the better. We have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1998, p. 9 my emphasis).

To assert a ‘new age’ within policy discourse, as does this extract from the UK Green Paper, The Learning Age, is to attempt to fabricate the ‘fact’ of the age of information and of global competition. It is an attempt to mobilize an audience, translating the concerns of different individuals and groups into a single narrative of change and adaptation. We may accept the assertion as a literal description of the state of the world, as if the new age exists and is unproblematic. We may also argue that the notion is designed to deceive, and search for better truths behind this deception. However, to respond in either such way is to ignore that rhetoric is involved in all descriptions of reality, including those of policy. It is also to miss the opportunity precisely to examine the work that rhetoric does in fabricating the facts of and mobilizing the new age. What rhetorical strategies are involved in constructing these facts? With what effects? If we can go some way to answering such questions, then we may begin to understand how policy works in constructing the facts of the world and become more discerning as to the way in which problems and possibilities are framed and fabricated. We may also be able to reconfigure our responses to policy.
In itself this is not a new idea (Schon, 1979; Straehle, *et al.* 1999) and it is one that I have
wish to pursue this interest further, by exploring the rhetorical work involved in
fabricating representations of lifelong learning in policy texts. The notion of the
fabrication of truth and action within lifelong learning policy is in itself a rhetorical
strategy. It is an attempt to counter previously persuasive acts of policy. It is a tactic of
indirect opposition, if you like, as it begins from a different point within language. Rather
than attempting to argue that policy discourses of lifelong learning have got the facts
wrong, it attempts to get at the realization of these ‘facts’ by looking at how they are
constructed and what these do in rhetorical terms. Through such an approach it may be
possible to bring forth an alternative form of productive politics through which to engage
in and counter policy processes.

The paper is in three sections. First, I discuss the question of rhetoric in policy in general
and lifelong learning policy in particular. Secondly, I offer some further rhetorical
This is followed by a brief summary of the argument for the importance of rhetorical
analysis to policy analysis more generally.

**The politics of truth**

Crisis narratives provide an imperative for policy action and invest situations with
political importance, almost regardless of the relative weight of evidence and analysis by
all concerned. They engender a certain policy hysteria (Stronach & MacLure, 1997).
They provide powerful exigencies for action. Many studies point to a lack of substance in
lifelong learning policy. While to point this out is important, this may be to devalue the
role and purpose of rhetoric in the construction of narratives of the world through which
we can be persuaded to act. This is, despite the importance of rhetoric and rhetorical
analysis to be found in areas such as deconstruction (Parker, 1997), genre studies
(Freedman & Medway, 1994), and the representation of research (Nelson, *et al.*, 1987;
Atkinson, 1996). The argument here is that the study of policy in general and lifelong
learning policy in particular, precisely as rhetoric, can illuminate our understanding in
slightly different ways, which point to very real and powerful practices that are in play.
Here, the significance of the work is in beginning to reveal how constructions of the real
are made up (Potter, 1996) — fabricated — and made persuasive (Simons, 1990). Here
descriptions of crises are taken to be substantial actions in their own right.

In this paper then, I explore a particular example of a policy notion that has become
popular in recent years in many nations and among certain international organizations,
such as the European Union (EU) and the Organization of Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD). This is the notion of lifelong learning. It has been supported by a
description of the new age. Lifelong learning is argued to support economic
competitiveness and social inclusion, yet there is arguable substance to these claims. Its
logos perhaps resting more on the logic and coherence of the claims than the empirical
evidence. The espoused contributions to economic competitiveness, health and social
inclusion of lifelong learning are all subject to question (e.g. Coffield, 2002). Lifelong
learning has been, however, and continues to be, significant as a way of framing policy in
relation to post-school education and training. As lifelong learning has developed as a way of framing policy, there has been a diversification of the practices, practitioners and stakeholders, including researchers, mobilized as having a stake in this policy domain. Lifelong learning then seems to be a far more embracing notion than might be said to be the case in more traditional sector-based understandings of education and training. This in itself can be explored as part of rhetoric.

Rhetorical analysis examines the ways in which audiences are positioned or created. Creating an implied identity or solidarity between author and audience is one strategy of persuasion (Leach, 2000; Straehle, et al., 1999). The use of ‘we’ in policy discourse implies that everyone is in the same boat as the disaster hits for we are all confronted by the new age. The ‘we’ in policy texts on lifelong learning may be large and diverse but it aims to create and cement affinities that might not be possible through other types of discourse. This points to the significant purpose of policy in the ordering and reordering of networks (Barry, 2002) that signify discursive and inter-textual spaces, through which we mark ourselves (or are marked by policy texts) as belonging or not belonging (MacLure, 2003). Part of the action entailed is through the rhetorical work of those involved in policy, and in who is included and excluded as the audience for particular policies.

In constructing and mobilizing an audience it is necessary to construct an affinity and a description of the problems to be addressed and the directions to be taken that can be shared. The facticity of lifelong learning as a solution to particular problems of the world is one such description. Even though descriptions are endlessly various, the rhetorical strategies that are drawn upon in their fabricating may be quite regular and amenable to analysis in terms of the work that they do (Potter, 1996). The importance here is to find some form of analysis that can get to the detail of the rhetorical work done within policy discourses and texts, in this case. I work in part with notions of ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ rhetoric outlined by Potter (1996). Rhetoric can be taken to work offensively to ‘reify’, and defensively to ‘ironize’ positions.

Reifying meanings to turn something abstract into a material thing … These are accounts which are producing something as an object, be it an event, a thought or a set of circumstances. In contrast, we will refer to discourse which is undermining versions ironizing (Potter, 1996, p. 107, emphasis in original). Reifying is a strategy to put something beyond question, to naturalize or ontologically gerrymander it. Ironizing attempts to undermine an alternative position, by, for instance, positioning it as ‘spin’. These are useful notions, as they emphasize the struggle that goes on within policy discourses, the struggle to produce descriptions that can be taken as literal, and the ways in which they work defensively to counter alternative possibilities. Policy facts are represented as such in order to do something, and representing such facts is itself action. Discourses of lifelong learning are then both represented and in so doing are action orientated. Let us now turn to a specific example of rhetorical action.

The rhetoric of lifelong learning
We return to the new age and modernizing discourse of the New Labour government in the UK since 1997. Central to this discourse has been the positioning of ‘traditional’
public services, including education and training, as no longer being able to meet the challenges of the 21st century. ‘We are in a new age—the age of information and global competition … we have no choice but to prepare for this new age’ (DfEE, 1998, p. 9, emphasis added). In this discourse, the information age and knowledge society are reified as the conditions and exigence that make lifelong learning necessary and possible. ‘Learning is the key to prosperity … investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century’ (DfEE, 1998, p. 7, emphasis added). Thus, ‘to continue to compete, we must equip ourselves to cope with the enormous economic and social change we face, to make sense of the rapid transformation of the world, and to encourage imagination and innovation’ (DfEE, 1998, p. 10, emphasis added). This is the type of crisis narrative so important to policy discourse, but it is a crisis ‘we’ all face. The exigence is beyond the realms of interpretation and choice. It is a factual description and the certainty is the need to change. The ethos and logos of the text is built up through its use of the definite article and the imperative that arises from an acceptance of the exigence as persuasive.

In Potter’s terms (1996, p. 108, emphasis in original), the Green Paper offers a description oriented to action:

On the one hand, a description will be oriented to action. That is, it will be used to accomplish an action, and it can be analysed to see how it is constructed so as to accomplish that action. On the other, a description will build its own status as a factual version. For the most part, the concern is to produce descriptions which will be treated as mere descriptions, reports which tell it how it is.

The exigence of the Green Paper is reifying as it asserts the facticity of competition as the logos for the imperative to act. If we take the description literally, an act is performed by the text and, at the same time, a requirement for our own action as readers is also implicit. This reification is achieved through the forms of representation within an hierarchy of modalization (Latour & Wolgar, 1979). For instance, ‘we must equip’ is used rather than ‘the authors of this text think we must’ or ‘I feel we should’. Descriptions can be located at various levels on an hierarchy depending upon whether they are treated as unproblematic or provisional in some way. Generally, the less provisional and more separated out from the speaker, and the more solid the description appears. The elision of the speaker and the lack of provisionality in the assertion of ‘must’ work to try and make the description secure and to persuade the readership of the correctness of both the description and the action identified. Reification is also achieved through narrative organization and nominalization. The point at which a description starts is important to its rhetorical strategy in this as in all settings. Narrative organization depends upon the ordering of events and who takes part. It is in part through the narrative structuring of the text that particular meanings are made possible. In the Green Paper, by beginning with the new age of information, global competition and economic and social change, the narrative is structured to act in various ways. By asserting particular forms of competition and change as the starting point within a narrative structure, there is an attempt to circumscribe a whole prior debate about the reality of this representation.

Beginning the narrative with certain props already on the stage avoids having to more obviously bring them on later, and this takes our attention away from them. The props are
also brought on as real objects—a chair and table—rather than as things that are being
done by actors. Fairclough (2000, 27) points to the significance of this kind of
nominalization, where words are used as nouns instead of verbs.
Instead of representing economic processes as people applying means to materials
to produce things, the actual processes and people and things involved are
backgrounded, and we have instead ‘the economy’ as an entity. The phrase ‘the new
global economy’ presupposes that there is a new global economy—that is, it takes it
for granted, as something we all know.
Global competition, the age of information, and change are commonly represented as
nominalizations within policy discourse. What this does is to set up a range of objects
that appear to exist external to prior actions. It allows the writers to avoid attributing the
activities that are involved in competition, the information age and change to any
particular population or group. Furthermore, there is an ontological gerrymandering
going on here. By making a distinction between those ‘objects’ that exist, as if they were
naturally occurring within an environment, they can be argued to be the reality to which
we must respond - ‘… we have no choice but to prepare for this new age’ (DFEE, 1998,
p. 9, emphasis added). The division between what is taken to be real or socially
constructed are fabricated through our descriptions of the social world, and it is just such
a division that is built up, reinforced, and reified in policy.

Reification is also effected by presenting authoritative individuals and groups as in
agreement with the policy discourse, or positioning them as supporting it in general
terms. What forms of corroboration or warranting are used within this policy document?
Research discourses use citations and references as a warranting strategy. Within a policy
consultation paper such as the Green Paper (DFEE, 1998), corroboration activities occur
both in the form of consultation adopted and through various strategies deployed within
the text itself. The document thus works both externally and internally to distance its own
writers as agents and confirm that others are in agreement with it. However, as I will
illustrate, there is also work that it does in support of the following White Paper (DFEE,
1999). This illustrates a form of rhetorical work effected intertextually through formal
policy documents, in providing support for each other and policy discourses more
generally.

Let us scrutinize the work of the Green Paper as a policy consultation document and its
role in relation to the subsequent White Paper. Green Papers are requested by
governments in order that policy decisions inscribed in White Papers may be forthcoming
at a later date. Policy decisions need to be greeted with minimized opposition when they
are announced. Green Papers and their ensuing consultation processes operate to help
achieve this. Green Papers build up ‘foothing’ for the White Paper and, because the latter
is an outcome of a consultation process, help to undermine the potential subsequent
reading that the government might have a stake in what is decided—usually not very
successfully! In making this point, it is important to clarify that the intention is not to
suggest that governments generally have a stake or interest to hide. Rather, readers
commonly interpret government decisions in terms of stake and interest, and a prior paper
and consultation process is a strategy to help avoid this. This is a strategy of stake
management, which is, again, common within all forms of communication, because people:

treat reports and descriptions as if they come from groups and individuals with interests, desires, ambitions and stake in some versions of what the world is like. Interests are a participant’s concern, and that is how they can enter analysis. Management of stake is one of the central features in the production of factual discourse (Potter, 1996, pp. 110–111, emphasis in original).

The Green Paper and consultation process help to displace this kind of treatment. However, the text of the Green Paper itself draws upon further rhetorical strategies to help manage issues of interest or stake. The situation for a government is tricky. In setting up a consultation process, the signal to the public is one of ensuing decision-making and action. This may be unsettling for those who might be affected. At the same time, it may afford dangerous potential for discourses to get out of control. A consultation process could potentially produce suggestions that sit quite outside what is politically acceptable or rhetorically felicitous. A consultation process is not just a situation for previous discourse to be reiterated, therefore, but has potential to be one for the formation of a new verbal act or primary text. With the Green Paper, one strategy was to elide authorship entirely—there is no note to suggest who may have been involved in writing it—and to provide footing for the description by identifying a range of previous committees whose work was drawn upon. A further strategy is to control debate by setting the questions that are to be responded to. This acts to control discourse by setting the terrain of debate in advance.

Reification of the imperative to learn is supported within the Green Paper through the presentation of evidence of national weaknesses in performance with regard to learning. Evidence is provided through a forensic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses when compared to other nations:

The country’s current learning ‘scoreboard’ shows strengths, but also some serious weaknesses. A great strength is our universities which educate to degree and postgraduate level and set world-class standards. The UK is second only to the USA in the number of major scientific prizes awarded in the last 5 years. The proportion of graduates in the working population has almost doubled over a decade. Our research excellence is valued by many companies which choose to base their research capacity in the UK. A further strength is the existing commitment among many people to gaining qualification. Fourteen million people have National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2 (equivalent to five or more higher grade GCSEs) … Our weakness lies in our performance in basic and intermediate skills. Almost 30% of young people fail to reach NVQ level 2 by the age of 19. Seven million adults have no formal qualifications at all; 21 million adults have not reached level 3 (equivalent to 2 A levels), and more than one in five of all adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills. As the chart below shows, we lag behind France, Germany, the USA, and Singapore in the proportion of our workforce qualified to level 3. In the case of graduates, even though we have a high number, we need to encourage more of our highly qualified people to
update their skills through continuing professional development (DFEE, 1998, paragraphs 21 and 22).

These national scores ostensibly offer empirical evidence to support the logos for change. They are national measurements that pit the UK against other nations in a competition over specific forms of learning achievement. In so doing, it fabricates and orders both competition and particular geographical and political divisions as significant. It turns our attention—within UK universities, further education colleges, and workplaces—towards particular domains of activity, through which we may recode these divisions. This fabricates a discourse of international competition and a certain inscription of territory. It is not a global inscription, as it ignores significant parts of the world, but positions ‘us’ in relation to those nations that we might view as our competitors. There is an implicit spatial strategy in play in such policy discourses. By describing the world in such a way that evidence of the UKs lack in learning is clear, the activities of ‘we’, the reader, become required in amelioration of these deficits. We become mobilized in this international competition. National and international competitiveness are recoded, at least in part, in terms of the psychological, dispositional and aspirational capacities of those that make up the labour force … Personal employment and macro-economic health is to be ensured by encouraging individuals to ‘capitalize’ themselves, to invest in the management, presentation, promotion, and enhancement of their own economic capital as a capacity of their selves and as a lifelong project (Rose, 1999, p. 162).

Following consultation on the Green Paper, the White Paper (DFEE, 1999) was published the next year. It began with the Preface by the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett. The opening sentence refers back to the earlier paper: ‘In the Green Paper The Learning Age we set out our vision of how lifelong learning could enable everyone to fulfil their potential and cope with the challenge of rapid economic and social change’ (DFEE, 1999, p. 3, emphasis added). Here, the policy text repeats the nominalizations that were the narrative start of the Green Paper. In so doing, it gerrymanders the same division between that which exists, that is, rapid economic and social change, and learning throughout life as our response to that reality.

However, it also differs, as it builds up its own footing upon the Green Paper and consultation process that has arisen from it. The description, through repetition, is rhetorically presented as quite literally the case, with no sense of the agency that engenders particular forms of change and the implied possibility of alternatives. We do not know what happened in the consultation process, apart from what we are told. However, we can be sure that aspects of the description within the Green Paper that promoted particular opposition are likely to have been modified within this subsequent one. This points to a rhetorical function of consultation, where strategies that are less than persuasive can be identified and modified. Here, for instance, it may be significant that the national scores of achievement through which the requirement to compete is partially and territorially inscribed are not repeated in the White Paper, given the contestation that surrounds such attempts at comparison. In addition, there is more conditionality in the Preface to the White Paper than in the Green Paper. The only definite article is that lifelong learning ‘will ensure’ the economic transition to the future. Rhetorically, the
claims are lesser, even as the White Paper positions itself as a bold response to the audience for the Green Paper:

many of those who commented recommended a bold programme of change in national and local arrangements. They confirmed our view that current arrangements provided an insufficient focus on quality, failed to give men and women the support they need, and were too provider driven … There was, therefore, widespread support for fundamental change … (DFEE, 1999, p. 3). The authority for the policy is, therefore, built upon the footing of the consultation, in which the government’s view is endorsed, thereby legitimizing the bold modernization to which it aspires. The White Paper represents not only the views of government, but also those who have participated in the policymaking process. The consultation process has mobilized a policy audience who are enrolled, recontextualized, and represented in the discourse of the White Paper.

To simply dismiss this rhetorical work as ‘spin’ or even ‘mere rhetoric’ is to miss the significance of the work that is being attempted through such discursive practices. This is not to say that this is the only form of encounter with policy that is possible or legitimate. However, it is to suggest that additional and interesting things can be said/written/done about lifelong learning policy processes and discourses and policy more generally. And I obviously have a stake in making such a claim.

**Policy as the fabrication of truth and action**

Lifelong learning is in part a work of truth-building and truth-telling within policy narratives. The above analysis is thus not in any way an attempt to suggest that the Green Paper was spinning us a line, as it is through rhetorical strategies that all such discourses attempt to both represent and act. Potter (1996) suggests that it may be that factual descriptions are much more likely when someone is to be asked indirectly to act in a certain way, in particular, where there are sensitive issues of who has interest or stake in the action. Indeed, the more sensitive the issue, the more likely the request will be implicit and bound up in a factual description. Factual descriptions can be helpful if we are to be persuaded to act, in particular when those doing the asking may be perceived as having a stake in the matter. This paper has merely attempted to identify some of the rhetorical strategies that such descriptions entail. It may be that by isolating these, by making them ‘visible’, it may be possible to find alternative ways for engagements in the politics of policy. The analysis has pointed to some of the conceptual resources upon which one can draw in undertaking rhetorical deconstructions of policy texts and discourses, in this case, of lifelong learning.

The metaphors of reification and ironization allow us to begin to consider forms of activity within policy descriptions of lifelong learning. However, the division between them is never entirely complete. The Green Paper acts by building a ‘we’ within a new age, for which we have no choice but to prepare, and this is reification work. It also works to ironize, for who would not want to join the opportunities club? The logos of competition, positioned at a high level of modalization, work to build up – to reify – the facticity of this exigence for action. Corroboration of the description is by citation and referencing is clearly a support to facticity. It builds facticity further, but also makes it
more difficult to argue with the description, if the status of those referred to is high. Narrative start and organization take our attention away from any focus on the assertion of the new age of information, global competition and economic and social change. They defy as they act to make it less likely that we focus on alternative possible descriptions. The description works in part by gerrymandering a division between certain objects that it takes as given, and our necessary response to them. We expect such gerrymandering, and the description that is produced is ‘figurable’ in part because of our cultural memories. What this kind of analysis is good for is in producing a language through which the rhetorical activity of descriptions can begin to be unpicked and considered.

This paper has taken policy discourses of lifelong learning as a focus in attempts to invent a form of rhetorical analyses that might be productive within education policy studies. I have not been concerned over questions of the ‘truth’ of lifelong learning. It seems useful to me that we should be able to consider the rhetorical strategies that are drawn upon in order that specific policy descriptions can be persuasive. This reminds us that lifelong learning is quite specifically fabricated and reinforced within and through utterances. They are persuasive in their multiplication, migrations and repetitions. Our acceptance of lifelong learning as an object to discuss and describe as a truth of any sort acts to reinforce and stabilize it as an object. We treat it as if it were real and could be made more real. This leaves us with a heightened awareness of the imbrications and interconnections of our own utterances in ways that are to some extent are normalized within current times. That we can identify the specifics of the rhetorical strategies that are drawn upon in the constitution of objects of policy discourse creates a disruption in our commonplace assumptions that statements of truth can be made that are devoid of rhetoric or power. Through further such theorizing we may perhaps be able to detect further regularities and discontinuities and, through this, find means for their productive support or disruption. It may be, for example, that we can avoid within our own discourses descriptions that begin from the same place; that draw upon similar figurability, objects, beginnings, structures, locations and positionings. We can act to avoid these as rhetorical regularities, to work with them as constructions within language and as the activities of specific groups. This is to point to our potential as rhetoricians in the narratives in and around lifelong learning.

References


