REFRAMING FUTURE LIFELONG LEARNING DISCOURSES

Gun Berglund
Umeå University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses if, and then how, we can envision present and future ideals such as a 'learning society' consisting of successful 'lifelong learners', without excluding 'others' who do not fulfil the norms of such a society. That is, how can we re-frame future lifelong learning as an inclusive discourse?

KEYWORDS

discursive stories – deconstruction – the lifelong learner – the 'other'

INTRODUCTION

It should not be an overstatement to say that lifelong learning has become one of the most popular 'hooks' in modern educational policy. Much hope is invested in lifelong learning globally as well as locally. As discourses of lifelong learning operate in a variety of contexts such as schools, universities, adult education, liberal education, workplaces, libraries and community centres, there are different meanings and usages of 'life', 'long' and 'learning' (Berglund 2004, 2008). Although there are national and sectorial differences concerning these three aspects, there is a shared meta-language pursuing an urge to be proactive. To large extent different national discourses in the Western world display a common analysis of contemporary problems and how these should be dealt with.

As a policy concept lifelong learning is put forwards as a key tool to accomplish the desired future society: the 'learning society'. As such, it mobilizes nations, organizations as well as individuals and promises prosperity, growth and development as a reward (Popkewitz *et al* 2006, Jarvis 2007). When conceptualising the 'learning society' a number of paradoxes of lifelong learning emerge. First, lifelong learning is construed as a discourse of risk and fear as it visualises the social and economic catastrophes that will emerge unless developing a 'learning society' populated by 'lifelong learners'. At the same time it expresses a discourse of hope of a better future (Berglund 2008, Popkewitz 2006). Another paradox concerns how the construction of the 'lifelong learner' as the desirable citizen of the learning society also addresses its semantic opposite as the undesirable 'other' who fails to live up to the expectations of such a society (Ibid).

This paper discusses how such paradoxes instead of arousing despair could be productive tools as eye-openers that can lead to change. It focuses on how we can conceptualize lifelong learning practices such as policy-making, educational practices, work-related practices and self-improving practices as *discursively produced stories* and how such stories also express what is considered to be normal/abnormal and desired/undesired within a certain discourse. Discursive stories can be read and understood as 'confessions' that express our understanding of our past and present, but they also express how the future is perceived. Understanding and analysing lifelong learning as discourse can thus be a productive way of thinking about the future since discourses are not to be regarded as fixed 'truths', but are open to possible change.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper rests on a newly published doctoral thesis (Berglund 2008) in which deconstruction was used as a methodology to open up and challenge contemporary lifelong learning discourses in Sweden, Australia and the USA. The thesis was concerned with how the rhetorical construction of lifelong learning in contemporary policies shapes our understandings of the present, which also includes an understanding of the past as well as the future. Theoretically, it rests on a poststructuralist assumption that what people take for granted as facts and truth is the result of a social construction of thought (MacLure 2003, Foucault 1979, 1980). From such an understanding truth is construed differently in different discourses in different times in history as a matter of power-knowledge relations (Foucault 1979). The truths that are taken for granted within a discourse do therefore not represent *the* reality, but are to be understood as re-presentations of what is held as true and real within a discourse as a function of the power-knowledge relations of the discourse. As such, there are always competing versions of the world, which may be described as the politics of representations (Latour 1999). Language plays an important part in the production of discourse since it both construes and is construed as a social relationship (Nicoll 2003, MacLure 2003). Accordingly, the language used when talking and

writing about lifelong learning both reflects socially negotiated ideas and shapes imperatives of normative behaviour. Language in all its communicative forms: written, spoken, articulated in art, music, dance etc., produces *artefacts* resembling discursively produced knowledge that are held true within specific communities of thought and practice. Language is thus far from being neutral. Derrida (1976/1997) refers to such artefacts as 'text'. The work of the analyst is to read such 'text' critically to open up and deconstruct its discursive truths.

The artefacts – 'text' – of concern for this paper are Swedish, Australian and American policy documents written between 1994 – 2003 (Berglund 2008). These three countries are all part of the so-called Western world that, to some extent, shares a common cultural and historical tradition, which might be called a Western discourse. The studied documents are thus located within this shared cultural sphere, even though there are local differences in the uptakes of values, resulting in different local practices. The selected texts (see document list in Berglund 2008:54-57) were published on Internet sites, which had lifelong learning as a prominent theme. The selection of texts recognise different kinds of lifelong learning settings and practices such as the national or state levels of government, schools, universities, adult education, liberal education, workplaces, libraries, and community centres. My assumption was that publishing a text on the Internet indicates a deliberate act of choosing *what* to publish, *when* to do so and to what *audience* the text is directed. As such, each document is regarded as a discursive expression of what an actor of some kind intentionally wishes to add to the general discussion of lifelong. The usage of 'policy-documents' – or 'policy-texts' – in this paper thus imply such a broad understanding of policy. The search for documents came to result in different kinds of policies in the three national settings as different emphasises are given to lifelong learning in these contexts. I interpret this as a signifier of different national discourses (Berglund 2004).

The understanding of policy-writing described above thus realises how language acts to build up representations of reality through rhetorical strategies (Potter 1996, Nicoll 2003). One of the main characteristics of policies is that they work to persuade an audience of some sort of 'goods', which make them hard to contest. Deliberate and persuasive rhetoric is thus an inherent feature of policy genres (Edwards & Nicoll 2001). The documents studied for this thesis were created

either as policy tools for reshaping educational and labour market practices or as critical commentaries on such policies. They comprise rhetorical devices intended to persuade their audiences of the benefits of lifelong learning or, indirectly, support the policy-making processes by adding critical perspectives to the general (global) discussion of which lifelong learning is part. Policy texts, whether rhetorically expressing a positive or negative attitude towards their object of concern (e.g. lifelong learning), could therefore be studied as discursive artefacts (see above), or what Foucault refers to as 'schemas of politicisation' (1980:190). As such, policy texts are imbricated with power-knowledge that works to construct a 'grand narrative', i.e. imply an objective truth to motivate the kind of (political) action that the policy purports (Nicoll 2003).

A central idea of the study has been to conceptualize lifelong learning policies as stories. Drawing on Derrida and Foucault, any such 'text' could be read as a story of the specific time and context of which it is part. Such stories are not to be understood as 'grand narratives' in the Kantian sense trying to establish an objective truth, neither as subjective personal or anthropological narratives or life-[hi]stories, in the hermeneutic sense (Davis 2004, Ketz de Vries & Miller 1987). Rather, stories are understood in a poststructural sense as historicized artefacts of a specific discourse, dependent of the time and place where they appear. Foucault uses the expression 'a history of the present' (1977/1994), or 'an ontology of the present', referring to "those particular truths' which have come to be accepted (almost without question) as realities of and for the present era" (Jose 1998:3). The understanding and usage of stories in this paper refers to such an understanding of the historicity of social activities. Such stories express, or make visible, different forms of confessions and rituals of truth. They express how we think about ourselves and the world we live in at a specific time and place (Foucault 1979). At the same time they express how the desired and undesired future is conceptualized.

Conceptualizing policy documents as stories of the past, present and future is a way of deconstructing – pulling apart and challenging – the discursive constructions of truth; i.e. what is taken for granted as normal and abnormal, moral and unmoral. In short, asking what is put forward as desirable and undesirable within a specific context of use and how such truth happens to be

established there and then. Such discursive stories do not only tell us something about the time and place we live in, but how we as human

beings, are subjected by and subject ourselves to the truth-regimes of the discourses of which we are part. At the same time we also subject ourselves to the truth-regimes of the visualized future. Foucault refers to such subjectification as 'governmentality' (Foucault 2000b, Rose 1999, Dean 1999), i.e. the discursively produces mentalities surrounding the government of others and of self-government. Such a reading of policies indicates a power-relation between those with the authority to govern others and those in the position of being appointed as policy targets.

Ketz de Vries & Miller (1987) refer to the objects of concern for a study as 'text' in terms of a critical incident, en entity or a story, comparing the work of a researcher with that of a detective. In order to understand the world as 'text' analysts "need to interpret the way these stories unfold; meanings, consequences and motives behind acts, decisions and social behaviour" (p.234). Regarding the researcher as a detective is a risky metaphor since it may lead to perceive the results as true facts. Derrida (1976/1997), takes deconstruction a step further saying that deconstructing a text means to open it up by disrupting, or interrupting, its truth claims. A poststructuralist reading of policies also means reading what is *not* said (Foucault 1972). In other words, a discourse analysis of the past, present and future should ask questions such as "how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" (Foucault 1972:27), which are the problems that are formulated and which are the responses that are presented as the solutions to these problems (MacLure 2003) and which other problems are thereby excluded? Other poststructuralist questions concern the discursive production of *the other* asking who is construed as the different, the excluded, the undesirable in different contexts and what makes such a construction possible?

Drawing on the works of Czarniawska-Joerges (1988), Furusten (1995), Ketz de Vries & Miller (1987), MacLure (2003) my study came to result in a three-step model: 1) *surface*, 2) *depth* and 3) *deconstruction* to open up the stories of lifelong learning. The first step consists of a surface analysis of the documents to establish the central themes in the policy rhetoric and analyse how rhetorical techniques are being used to persuade audiences of what is considered good by opposing it to what is held as bad. Initially I made a computer file for each national context: Sweden, Australia and the USA. The files comprised a description of each document in terms of their specific character and the context of which they were part. This description contained the following headings: Document context, Headlines, Keywords central themes, Binaries, and Metaphors and phrases. These aspects taken together came to result in eight central themes (see below) expressing different motives for, and aspects of, lifelong learning: Each theme contained a large number of keywords. They resemble what Czarniawska-Joerges (1988) terms 'labels', which she describes as linguistic artefacts. Labels, or keywords, tell us what things 'are', i.e. naming and classifying them, showing that their meanings are taken for granted (Furusten 1995). The document context expressed the type of organisation that the document represented (e.g. political authority, education provider, enterprise or labour union), at what level and the kind of audience that it was directed towards. The headlines were listed as signifiers of aspects that the author/publisher appeared to hold of special importance, if judged by the way they were specifically articulated and singled out as headlines. I selected the keywords after reading through the document several times to get a picture of its intended messages. After being listed they were grouped into themes. The headlines and the keywords taken together came to result in eight central themes expressing different motives for, and aspects of, lifelong learning:

- Individual aspects
- Politics
- Economics/finances
- Labour market/work aspects
- Education, learning, pedagogy
- Efficiency and rationality
- Structural, societal and organisational aspects
- References to other countries, research and agencies

At the surface level I was interested in obtaining a picture of how these keywords and central themes were grouped in and between the different documents and national contexts. The surface reading gave me an overview of which themes and keywords that were on the agenda in each national context and thus function as signifiers of the discourse. The dimension that most clearly expressed the meaning and values given to lifelong learning was the analysis of binaries, which actually meant leaving the surface level and starting a deeper analysis of the rhetoric. At this stage I listed the binary oppositions expressed in each document in terms of what they expressed about past/present, real/unreal, scientific/ unscientific,

proper/improper, moral/immoral (MacLure2003:73-74). Analysing the rhetorical technique of using binaries in policy texts as a means of persuading an audience gave a good indication of what was considered as good and desirable versus bad and undesirable. The analysis of the metaphors and phrases, some of which served as platitudes, further strengthened the arguments made in the documents and contributed to establishing the main themes. Czarniawska-Joerges (1988) discusses how 'the normal' is established through such rhetorical devices.

The third step in Ketz de Vries and Miller's (1987) model is where the actual *deconstruction* of the texts is performed by confronting, i.e. is challenging, the earlier interpretations against each others. Such an approach thus takes its point of departure in what at a first glimpse seems to be a structuralist reading of what the text *says*, but since the model includes strategies to deconstruct, i.e. open up the text, it also has an ambition to analyse what the text *does*. To deconstruct texts means to challenge their truth-production (Derrida 1976/1997) and to go behind and beyond their surface (Furusten 1995). Deconstruction is not a method per se (Derrida 1976/1997), neither is there a single strategy by which deconstruction is to be conducted (Furusten 1995). The use of deconstruction in this study has been to examine and challenge what is said within the central themes that emerged from the first two steps of the analyses by using different theoretical concepts and mind-games as analytical tools to *destabilise the taken for granted meanings expressed in the policy rhetoric*.

RESULTS

The analysis shows that the emphasis on *learning* is a prominent signifier of the present. It reveals that learning as a policy aspect wishes to penetrate all dimensions of life: 1) the private sphere (learning for 'life' and the 'self', i.e. identifying oneself as a lifelong learner), 2) work (centred on employability = skills + knowledge as a mathematical function of the global market) and 3) citizenship (learning for democracy and active participation in society and civil society). These aspects are sometimes referred to as the life*wide* dimension of learning (Cropley 1980, Rubenson 1996). Learning has become a normalized way of understanding our present to the extent that it has become almost impossible to think about ourselves, others and society without it. The policy rhetoric also proclaim learning as a life*long* endeavour. The emphasis on lifelong learning in the studied documents differ somewhat, though. In Sweden it is described as a matter of governmental concern from pre-school an onwards. In Swedish policy 'lifelong' thus refer to the whole life span whereas in the USA and Australia it mainly targets adults after compulsory school (Berglund 2004, 2008).

Lifelong learning is not only a way of considering lifewide and lifelong dimensions, but a tool used for disciplinary and corrective purposes to foster 'good', i.e. capable, efficient and productive, citizens for the 'learning society'. This stresses *the societal*, and thereby *political, dimension of lifelong learning*. The present and future ideal society is depicted as a 'learning society' where 'the lifelong learner' is the norm (Berglund 2008, Popkewitz *et al* 2006). Being, i.e. behaving and identifying oneself, as a 'lifelong learner' has become the desired and necessary lifestyle within the learning society. Such an emphasis on (compulsory) individual subjectification to societal expectations aiming to cover all dimensions of life is another prominent signifier of the present. Or, in other words, using a quotation from Popkewitz *et al* (2006:436): "in different contexts and with different logics, the same story seems to be told. The story is that we are now, more or less, obliged to live with constant change in society. Modern schooling, for example, continually links the individual to narratives of social or economic progress and the revitalization of democracy that will bring personal betterment".

Further, the study at hand showed that 1) the present meta-discourse of lifelong learning is work-related rather than life-related. The focus on learning for work is a strong imperative. Life-related learning is supposed to support the economic competition on the Market, rather than vice versa. 2) The positive rhetoric of lifelong learning and its focus on ideal lifelong learning is accompanied by a parallel story of deviance, incompetence and failure in that it points our certain groups and individuals as target groups. This in turn leads to 3) a pathologization of those 'other' who fail to live up to the expectations of the ideal of the 'lifelong learner'. Since lifelong learning is referred to as the key to accomplish the learning society, also depicted as a 'healthy society', such pathologization simultaneously construes lifelong learning as a discourse of 'medicalization' where lifelong learning is regarded as a cure to restore the unhealthy 'non-learners' to what is implied in the policy rhetoric as the healthy state of the lifelong learner (Berglund 2008b).

In the mind-game of visualising lifelong learning as a medicalized discourse the professionals in education and learning, e.g. policymakers,

politicians, educational planners, researchers and management gurus act as expert 'doctors' who set up the rules of the game by reference to their professional expertise. Such professional position legitimizes the power/knowledge to distinguish the deviant from the normal, the healthy from the unhealthy the desirable from the undesirable and the moral from the moral. The doctors of this level are designed for what Foucault (1977/1999) terms *hierarchical observation*. On the operational level, doctors make the anamnesis and diagnosis of the 'patients', i.e. identify and transform those who deviate from the norm of the lifelong learner. The doctors on this level operate for example as career and study counsellors, human resource managers and managers for different lifelong learning activities. By their position they are legitimized to ask the patients to tell their story of 'illness'. The written documentation of the anamnesis makes every patient a 'case'. This type of examination resembles what Foucault (1977/1999) refers to as *normalizing judgement*, which seeks to measure deviant behaviour and oppositional attitudes against the imperative of the norm. The medicalized discourse is also operated by 'nurses', i.e. teachers, educators, trainers etc, who take care of the actual treatment of the patient. To their help they have a number of techniques to cure the patients. Some techniques work to discipline the patient to reinforce the healthy signs of the lifelong learner, whereas other techniques work to direct the patient to become self-motivated. The patients are to subject themselves to the norms of the discourse, which Foucault (1988) refers to as *the government of the self*.

DISCUSSION

Present policy stories on lifelong learning use metaphors such as the learning society, the information society, the knowledge society etc to mobilise school-, workplace- and organisational reforms of different kinds in the making of a new world order that "expresses principles of a universal humanity and a promise of progress that seem to transcend the nation" (Popkewitz *et al* 2006:431). Such an understanding of the present is often referred to in terms of *neo-liberalism* or *advanced liberalism* (see e.g. Jarvis 2007, Rose 1999). "What is 'new' in the present is the particular amalgamation of cultural practice that fabricate 'the social' and individuality" (Popkewitz *et al* 2006:445). The past, present and future discourses thus produce certain ideas of the social and how individuals should subject themselves to the social domain. The "cosmopolitan way of life" (Popkewitz *et al* 2006) construes lifelong learners as ideal citizens of the learning society, but also inscribes the "anthropological 'Other' who stands outside reason and its civilizing manners of conduct" (Popkewitz *et al* 2006:433). Cosmopolitan stories are thus about inclusion and exclusion and how the present neoliberal discourse, through the use of policy rhetoric, produces 'others' as targets for governmental techniques.

As referred to above the learning society is rhetorically depicted as a 'healthy society' in lifelong learning policies. The cosmopolitan lifelong learner thus resembles the healthy individual … "The healthy citizen feels and acts with responsibility for their immediate and broader community as a personal obligation for the future and the society as a whole." (Popkewitz *et al* 2006:444) … whereas the 'other' is pathologised as an unhealthy citizen who is in need of treatment to be cured in order to be useful to society. As the ideal of the self-governed (learning) subject is significant for the present, a present normalised 'truth' is that such identities can be learned. This in turn creates docile, i.e. educable and teachable, bodies, which are construed both as objects for policy concern and subjects who can be taught to govern their lives in relation to the expectations of the present cosmopolitan ideals. The 'unfinished cosmopolitan' (Popkewitz *et al* 2006), who is at-risk of disturbing the reason of the ideal world order is thereby possible to reinsert in society. Lifelong learning can therefore be described as a project for national, as well as global mobilisation, not only to maintain the present cosmopolitan society, but to secure such a future world order.

Beck's (1992) notion of the 'risk society' is a strong signifier of present lifelong learning discourses. The responsibility to avoid future social and economic catastrophes is associated with the power/knowledge of experts (Turner 2001). The potential risks legitimises lifelong learning activities to reinsert the undesirable others as cosmopolitan lifelong learners. Lifelong learning stories of the present with their focus on 'risk' also express a discourse of fear. Such discourses are significant in many meta-stories about the present. There is the risk of terrorist attacks, of pandemic deceases, of a stock-market crash, of environmental catastrophes due to the greenhouse effect etc. that, taken together, produces a global meta-discourse of fear. Paradoxically, lifelong learning discourses also produces the 'other' of fear, i.e. they tell stories of hope since lifelong learning is envisioned as *the* tool to solve almost any problem through its trust in education and in individuals who are or can be lifelong learners. As such, lifelong learning discourses also tell stories of liberation

(Simons & Masschelein 2006). I think this is where the discussion about re-framing the future ought to start.

CONCLUSION

A deconstruction, such as the one presented here, may help to identify problematic issues. The starting points for the future should be: things could be different! The question is how we visualize the future. What do we want? Who are 'we' who are in the position of framing and/or reframing the future? Which positions do 'we' make possible for the targets of policy concerns and how do we value those positions? The initial questions of this paper was if, and then how, we can envision present and future ideals such as a 'learning society' consisting of successful 'lifelong learners', without excluding 'others' who do not fulfil the norms of such a society. That is, how can we re-frame future lifelong learning as an inclusive discourse? Given the logics of discourse it may not be possible to think about the future without simultaneously producing 'others'. On the other hand, this does not necessarily have to be a bad thing per se. Having knowledge about how the policy discourse of lifelong learning produces different subjectivities as desirable or undesirable can give new insights and open up new possible ways to include people in the formation of the future.

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