

**The quality agenda as a socio-political process: some issues on knowledge and subjectivity (0118)**

The paper will discuss the effects of quality procedures on the formation of a student's 'subjectivity' (cf. Barthes 1977; Bernstein 2001; Kress 2008): the question broadly framed, of what forms of subjectivity are implied, suggested, fostered or produced even, in the contents and the organizations, the deeper epistemologies as well as the implicit pedagogies, of the quality agenda (cf. Cowen 2008; Henkel 1998; Readings 1996). Added to this is the equally silent question of how such differences might or could play out in differential ways in the socially, ethically and culturally deeply diverse higher education institutions that currently characterize the English higher education system and its implications for structuring knowledge, teaching and learning (cf. Barnett 2007; Standish 2005). Finally, we shall comment on how the work of the lecturers, responding to the interests of their students, can be shaped by their attempts to relate to the forms of knowledge and subjectivity encoded in universities, via the complex demands of quality procedures, institutional policies, higher education tradition as well as the lecturers' 'formation'. This paper, therefore, explores how the key actors (academics and students) in the pedagogical process have adjusted their approaches to transmitting and acquiring knowledge in response to the emergence of 'the quality agenda'.

The paper is largely conceptual in character. However, we will illustrate our argument by reference to the United Kingdom, and more particularly England. How has the idea of quality in higher education been articulated? What counts as quality in higher education? The institutionalization of quality assurance and quality enhancement, especially through language, has an impact on the ways in which the idea of quality is constructed. More specifically, we will examine the articulations of the Robbins, Dearing and Browne Reports to see what they have to say, or simply fail to say, about the idea quality of English higher education (cf. Blake et al 1998). As Kress (1990) suggests, the meanings, the practices, the values, the prohibitions as well as the demands of an institution are linguistically expressed.

In this paper, therefore, we shall examine how 'quality' is manifested in the texts of these three seminal reports. Such texts not only construct the meaning of quality but also help to shape institutional practices. Texts constrain what academics may be and how they might think of themselves. But beyond that, the texts may specify what higher education might be and what a student might be as well as the relations between students and academics. The texts exert specific reading positions, while reading positions lead to certain modes of thinking and being (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). But it is our contention that the outcomes can be negotiated, often implicitly, between the interested parties whether it be the translation of ideas into institutional policy or the realization of that policy within the context of teaching, learning and evaluation. However, it needs to be appreciated that the various parties to the negotiation process may have conflicting values, contrasting resources, and different amounts of power. Moreover, they may also have contrasting interpretations of the purposes of the quality agenda, which could lead to a situation in which outcomes are complied with rather than perceived as the product of a legitimate process of negotiation.

Our discussion and analysis is influenced by the developments in discourse analysis, text linguistics and in French structuralist work. Two example of the former are James Paul Gee's *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method* (1999) and Jan Bloomaert's *Discourse* (2005). The foremost exponent of text-linguistics is Teun van Dijk, whose *Text and Context* (1977) provides a statement of the position. Norman Fairclough's *Language*

*and Power* (2001) has been of fundamental importance in the study of the relations between language and social institutional practices and of wider political and social structures. Michael Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1974) includes a paper 'Orders of Discourse', which provides fundamental insights into the status, functions and effects of discourse.

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