

Using critical discourse analysis to better understand how national higher education policy is played out in educational development practice. (0207)

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## **Abstract**

There is a paucity of higher education research that both critically analyses policy and explores the impact of policy on educational development practice. This paper presents findings from a research project that used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to better understand the process of production, interpretation, and implementation of a leading national UK learning and teaching policy, with particular reference to the educational development community. The combination of textual analysis and in-depth interviews with policy developers and policy users provide rich data around educational developer influence in policy matters; word choice in policy texts; the constraints of policy format; and the impact of involvement in research on practice. I argue that the combination of data collection and analysis methods used in CDA provide greater insights into how policy is played out in higher education practice than the employment of any one of these methods individually could have achieved.

## **Paper**

Recent research has shown that many higher education research articles describing themselves as policy articles do not offer a sustained critical analysis of the policies they cite, instead they focus on influencing broadly conceived policies (Ashwin & Smith 2015). As a result, there is little real understanding of how policies impact on higher education practice and how they are resisted, ignored, adapted or accepted in particular contexts. Similarly, as educational development has become increasingly strategic, educational developers have found themselves authoring, contributing and responding to institutional and national policy priorities (Gosling 2009); yet despite this refocussing of many educational developers' work priorities, there remains scant research connecting educational development practice with specific higher education policies. Finally, while higher education research using methods from critical discourse analysis (CDA) has increased in recent years, such research has focussed almost predominantly on the analysis of spoken and written texts and has not complemented these analyses with studies into the production and reception of those texts (Smith 2013). This paper aims to address these gaps in current higher education policy research by offering a critical analysis of a specific national policy, using methods from CDA, that go beyond textual analysis, to explore how policy messages are played out in educational development practice.

This paper draws on a project funded by SEDA@20 Legacy Grant (Smith 2014). This research used CDA to analyse a major UK learning and teaching policy, the Learning and Teaching Chapter (henceforth the Chapter) from the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Quality Code (henceforth the Code). The analysis drew specifically on Fairclough's dimensions of discourse and discourse analysis (2010), focussing on: the structure, organisation and choice of words in the policy text itself; the way in which the text was developed and how it is interpreted; and the socio-cultural conditions that

govern the process of the policy's production, reception and implementation. The combination of the textual analysis of existing policy documentation (the Chapter) and the interpretation of in-depth interview data collected from the policy developers who formed the part of the Chapter's Advisory Group (five interviews) and a sample of educational developer policy users (ten interviews) painted a rich picture of higher education policy in the context of educational development practice. Key findings included the following:

- The extent to which the educational developers involved in the development of the Chapter (as Advisory Group members) subtly influenced the Chapter by implicitly writing the educational development function into the policy text. While the function was implied through the range of activities described, the terms 'educational development', 'academic development', 'educational developer' and 'academic developer' are absent from the text itself. The Chapter speaks to and of the educational development community but does so without making explicit reference to them. For some of the educational developers interviewed this absence from the text was unproblematic; they saw where their presence was implied and wrote themselves back into the text. For others, a lack of explicit mention left them feeling unsupported and undervalued.
- The debates during the policy's development around the use of particular words and phrases, the form in which the words and phrases were written in the Chapter, and the policy users' responses to those words and phrases. Some words and phrases, which are highly contested within higher education research, were debated at length during development. In some cases, words and phrases (such as 'learning outcomes'; 'learning styles') were presented in the simple present tense, which reflect 'timeless truths' (Palmer 1985), where what is written is seen as uncontested and indisputable. This bristled with some educational developers, who strongly felt that the contested nature of these terms needed to be recognised. Other contested terms, for example working in 'partnership' with students, were treated differently; the modal verb 'can' was coupled with 'empower' to introduce uncertainty in relation to 'partnership learning', thus reflecting both policy developers and policy users discomfort with the phrase. The use of the quantifiers provoked discussion at both development and interpretation stages. The requirement to support 'every student' reflected the inclusive learning and teaching approach policy developers were seeking, while policy users recognised that ensuring 'every student' had equal access to support was hard to realise. Similarly, requirements that 'all staff' receive appropriate training and support raised issues for policy users, particularly the provision of development opportunities for non-traditional staff.
- The constraints on policy development when the policy being developed (the Chapter) is part of a suite of connected policies (the Code). Both the policy developers and the policy users reflected on decisions not to include assessment (or at least summative assessment) in a chapter on learning and teaching. Equally, the decision not to have specific chapters on inclusivity and technology were hotly debated, with some educational developers feeling that embedding these areas across all chapters in the Code would impact negatively on how inclusive practice and technology-enhanced learning were played out institutionally.

- Questioning the extent to which educational developers are policy-driven. The findings suggest that developers are policy-reactive and use policy to justify both their function and the direction of their work. The research also showed how involvement in policy-focussed research can impact on an individual's use of policy in their own practice, with educational developers stating that they were more likely to use the Chapter in their practice having taken part in the project.

Overall, this research sought to explore the extent to which educational development practice shapes and is shaped by higher education policy. The findings, perhaps inevitably, show a complex interplay of contributory factors. What I have aimed to show here, however, is that some of this complexity has come to light through the use of CDA, which has enabled a more critical reading of higher education policy development and reception. The combination of textual analysis with interviews with policy developers and policy users provides greater insight into how policy is played out in higher education practice than the employment of any one of these methods individually could have achieved and thus fills a gap in policy-focussed higher education research.

## References

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