Assignments in Postgraduate Studies: An Ethnographic Analysis of Power

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Abstract: This study was originated as part of an assignment for the 'Language and Power' module in the MA in Language & Cultural Diversity programme conducted at King's College London. It presents an ethnographic analysis of power and struggle in students' assignments in higher education or postgraduate studies. The steps towards the analysis were provided as a guideline toward an ethnographic case study of power (Rampton 2011). Using the notion of activity type purposed by Levinson (1979) is central to the analysis of power. Since power is relatively abstract, the notion of the activity type provides a number of dimensions that can be examined and thereby probe and illuminate the activity in a way that allows a number of considerations to be taken with respect to various aspects linked up with each dimension or component of the activity.

Keywords: Enthnographic Analysis, power and struggle, students' assignments, MA Programme

INTRODUCTION

Despite the existence of a considerable body of research that assert links between students' performance and programme learning outcomes in various study fields, there is relatively not much account of the discursive processes or practices involved that feed off and into these links. This paper explores the means by which discursive practices can affect the production and perception of students' written discourse. In what follow I will discuss written assignments

as a communicative practice; an institutional interaction, seeing that it "follow(s) a 'task-related standard shape,'... (that is) prescribed... (and is) the product of 'locally managed' routines," (Drew & Heritage as cited in Zimmerman, 1998, p. 96) in the context of higher education. An interaction whereby educators use to evaluate students' understanding and their ability to argue, criticize, and communicate textually in a particular context of use. However, it is important to note that these measures are only exercised on those who submit their assignments by their own accord and succeed in obtaining access to higher education systems. Only then, discursive practices operate in a way as to eventually "feed off and into (their 'final discourse' and their) local social life more generally" (Rampton, 2010, p. 237).

Perhaps, the most integral discursive practices in higher education are those based on literacy. Many of which involved before, during, and after the production of a piece of academic writing, for a module in higher education, can constrain, influence and determine more or less students' 'final discourse.' In other words, it is very crucial for students to be able to manage literacy practices by obtaining access and maintaining a level of competence in the discourse of a discipline. Moreover, since students' 'final discourse' determines the way they are perceived and graded, according to school marking criteria, they are thus engaged in a form of social interaction that can be seen as a site of social struggle over power. Therefore, it is important to look at this frequently used communicative practice to understand the discursive processes involved in written assignments which are perhaps the most important and usually the final interaction between students and the teaching staff of a particular module. However, marking those assignments can sometimes lead to further interaction between them generating power and struggle. The result of which can affect the production and perception of students written discourse, which can consequentially have an impact on individual, institutional, and to some extent societal outcomes. Accordingly, in what will follow, I describe the activity and analyze power by employing a number of different, nonetheless compatible perspectives on power, knowledge and discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Themes and Theories on Power

There are a number of perspectives that could be used in studying power and all that relates to it in discourse. However, Foucault's (1981 and 1982) account and purposed notions on power relations in discourse are by far the most influential and thereby frequently used. Accordingly, and for the purpose of this paper, I will make use of Foucault's (1981 and 1982) exposition of knowledge, power and the 'order of discourse' as the main theme of my analysis. I will also make use of Fairclough's (1989) purposed notions on power in and behind discourse, along with his account of discourse and sociocultural change (1995, p. 132-33), which explores ideology and how it is shaped by relations of power and struggle and links discourse practices with wider social processes. All of which will draw a more in depth description of the activity and the processes and practices involved to achieve its goal.

Data Collection

Data in this ethnographic case study have mainly been gathered from personal experience. Having dealt with this task-related communicative practice a number of times; I had the advantage of reflecting, studying and comparing my performance in a number of assignments that I have worked on previously. Even though these experiences form sketches from the past, they have appropriately served to lay the grounds for a better understanding of what I am currently engaged in. Appropriately, I have selected two very recent episodes that form my experience in writing for two different MA modules in my current study programme at King's College London. The titles of these are; 'Language, Identity, and Culture' and 'Researching Linguistic Diversity.' The courses are a thematic core and a research methods module, which represent the foundation for the study programme and therefore require careful planning by the course organizers

and extensive study by the students. The assessed parts of these modules are the assignments, which I have recently received feedback on. These, together with the textual materials that I have received throughout the term, have formed a rich sample of the discursive practices that I am looking to analyze. In this manner I was able to build my own data as a point of departure to examine and select literature that supports my analysis.

Methods

Since the following study is actually based on an assignment, the methods followed – in conducting and delivering it – are similar to those discursive practices linked with the communicative activity I am examining. These include following and studying reading materials, outlines, handouts, and notes of a particular module. The purpose of which is, not only to introduce and serve as a reference for students to a number of concepts, perspectives, methodologies, methods and techniques, but also to encourage and facilitate an approach to independent or autonomous learning that can contribute to the production of students' current and future academic work. However, such materials vary not only across modules and disciplines, but also between teaching staff of the same module. As for the methods used in the case of this study, they have been provided in the form of an outline towards an ethnographic analysis of power (Rampton, 2011), which includes steps towards a detailed description of the activity using the notion of activity type and guidelines and notes to follow for an accurate analysis on power in the described activity.

THE DESCRIPTION

Assignments in higher education represent a form of an independent critical study of a topic that is usually configured in a form of academic piece of writing of a moderate length usually between 2000 to 6000 words essay(s), intended to be

assessed by critical and well-informed academic figures. In that, it is an academic practice that is linked with literacy, which, as Fairclough (1989, p. 63) confirms, "is highly valued in our society." Accordingly, this triggers a number of realizations about the activity, specifically for those involved. Namely that, those who obtained access to the educational institution, the specific study programme and thereby the modules are privileged to access to knowledge and the related discursive practices in a different way, which will consequently place weight on the role of the activity and its immediate goals in light of the wider institutional, and perhaps societal, processes and outcomes involved. Therefore, those "who can achieve...(are) being correspondingly glossed over," (Fairclough, 1989, p. 64) thus the assessment, categorization, grades and finally the awarded certificate. However, this is a very general account of the different aspects that relate to the activity. The following subsections will illustrate components of the activity and simultaneously provide an account of power and struggle involved.

The Activity

Since power is relatively abstract, the notion of the activity type is central to its analysis. It provides a number of dimensions that can be examined and thereby probe and illuminate the activity in a way that allows a number of considerations to be taken with respect to various aspects linked up with each dimension. In line with that, Levinson (1979) notes that activity types can be defined as "culturally recognized units of interaction that are identifiable by constraints on (a) goals and purposes, (b) roles activated in the activity, (c) sequential structure or stages, and (to some extent) (d) participants and setting" (Rampton, 2011, p. 1). In line with that, assignments in higher education serve as a purpose and a goal that is usually declared and agreed upon between students and a teaching staff, and that is to communicate 'knowledge' that verifies understanding, an ability to conduct research and argue, criticize and write

in the context of a particular module, which represents a particular study field or an area of research. Interestingly, the constraints that define the components of the activity, in this case, function as a source of power that generates struggle over the course of the activity, for the participants involved.

Goals and purposes

Apart from being a tool of assessment, there are usually a number of specified and clearly stated purposes for any given assignment in a taught subject. Such purposes function as key targets to achieve and are usually stated as some kind of a list of objectives or outcomes to realize upon completing the subject or the module. Furthermore, what distinguishes goals and purposes of a given assignment in a particular module in higher education is the challenge to produce a paper that demonstrate 'mastering' certain skills. These include the ability to generate an accurate independent study of a certain standard in the area. Not only to demonstrate what have been learnt, but also to project ability to conduct future research and perhaps contribute to the study field. From this perspective, it is very important to examine the means by which assignments are agreed upon.

The topic or the title of a given assignment is presumably the goal of the activity that the students need to convey effectively. The decision of which is usually determined upon previous agreement between those who run the module and the students. With more power in the hands of the former, there are a number of constraints that can be exercised with regard to the topic. Usually there is a choice between either a) specifying an area of research using one or a number of methods to choose from, with choice left to students to decide 'what' and 'why,' or b) specifying an area of interest and leaving all freedom to students to decide 'what,' 'how' and 'why,' or finally c) specifying one or a number of questions or statements to choose from, which are usually designed to elicit something specific or a number of things that the

given module is supposed to achieve. Consequently a given choice will – more or less – determine the "discursive space[4]" in which students will have to operate.

"Discursive space," as I have experienced, can refer to the environment in which students have to adjust. For instance, in the case of the assignments that formed my experience in writing for the modules that I have mentioned earlier, two options have been chosen and thereby two "discursive spaces" have been, more or less, determined. In "Researching Linguistic Diversity," two 2000 words assignments were given; the topics were controlled in terms of the area of research and methods of use, in that partial freedom was left for me to decide 'what' and 'why.' Through having partial control over the topic I was able to combine "this," which – at the time – I was not familiar with, with "that," which I am usually comfortable to work on. Creating by using that combination was somewhat new "discursive space,' in which I was able to function. On the other hand, in "Language, Identity, and Culture," one 4000 words assignment was given, the topic of which was strictly controlled as to elicit a given material, which has created a dilemma in having to decide, not only between the two given topics (a statement and a question) but also, between "what is meant by the statement or the question," "what I know or supposed to have learnt" and "what I am supposed to convey." Upon that, the "discursive space" in which I was caught in was rather alien to me, common to the other, and thus it was very difficult in the course of the activity to convey 'knowledge,' let alone to do so using my own voice.

Before moving to consider other components that form the activity, it is important to allude to the notion of discourse or language as being "constitutive." According to (Wetherell, 2001, p. 25) and according to Blommaert (2005, p. 222) "Voice refers to the capacity to make oneself understood as a situated subject" in the text. Fairclough (1995, p. 131) "language use is always simultaneously constitutive of (i) social identities, (ii) social relations and (iii) systems of knowledge and beliefs... with different degrees of salience in different cases." This suggests that in the case of assignments

in the context of higher education or postgraduate studies, a student is, more or less, able to reconstruct these dimensions through language in various degrees, which emphasizes the importance of having a space to recreate a given "discursive space" in order to operate. Moreover, this highlights questions about the long-term goals of undertaking a postgraduate study, which, in turn, triggers current issues of students as learning consumers in higher education, which will be clarified in the following sections.

Setting, participants, and roles

This section combines what were two different sets of components in the definition of the activity above. The reason for combining them is that, although different, they are intrinsically related. To begin with, let us consider the setting of the activity. It is recognized that the setting in which the activity is shaped or conducted is highly variable. Since students are usually left alone to work on their assignments, there are various settings in which they might feel comfortable to work at. These can include the library, a private study area, student's lounge, a private residency, or even a café. This is perhaps very obvious; however, there is a parallel setting in which the activity is simultaneously being shaped. If we say that the activity is task-related and is part of an institutional interaction then the processes involved as means of accomplishing it – no matter where they are being conducted – remain part of that domain of the institution. In other words, assignments remain part of an activity that is still linked to a module, in which it was communicated, and a college or a university that will eventually evaluate and reward the person for accomplishing the 'task.' Hence, it is possible to say that the latent boundaries of the second setting, which relates to that of the institution, contain that of the first. Or, in other words, the choice of the setting by the student would not have been validated without the existence of the second and in that they are intrinsically linked. Another indication of the above, are the various conditions that have

been issued as means of institutionalizing the activity. Even though students would very often work on their assignments outside the university, and in some cases might not have been to the university since they are enrolled online, an assignment has to follow the regulations announced by the department or the school of the associated university. For instance, it has to follow the discourse of the community, has to be submitted bearing the name and logo of the university, or at times enclosed with an official cover and plagiarism sheets.

Second to consider are the participants involved in the activity. Even though the number of participants in the course of the activity does not usually exceed 2 – a student and a member of teaching staff of the particular module – there are other participants who can, more or less, affect or shape the activity in various ways. Students, for any given reason, might sometimes seek further advice or assistance from someone other than the teaching staff of the module; the list of these people can include previous instructors, academic advisors, tutors, friends, classmates, a family member, or even a recognized person within the study field or any anonymous person from the Internet. However, those who run the module contribute directly and more effectively on the production of students written discourse; having designed and organized class sessions, discussions, reading materials, handouts and outlines they have more impact on student's line of thinking and direction of their written discourse. Because the majority of these class activities are designed in a way as to logically and/or chronologically inaugurate and enforce established knowledge to found and direct students' line of thinking. This organized interaction between the student and the professor(s) highlights their institutional roles and relationship. However, this social interaction remains influenced by – amongst many – participants' perception of their roles, goals and interest. This, in turn, leads to a discussion of the third and final point in this section, namely, participants' roles activated in the activity. The discourse of a given community varies according to the situation or activity. In the case of written assignments the discourse has to be that of the Standard English language with vocabulary

that correspond with the given field of study. The community here refers to the educational domain, most specifically the study field

Since students are to some extent outsiders, when they start a study programme, they most often struggle and require more conscious efforts to build their repertoire and adapt to a new way and line of thinking, in order to be able to discursively reconstruct a new social identity, and thereby claim a place in the particular study field and/or in their local social life more generally. According to Archer (as cited in Maclean, 2010, p. 177), "A social identity offers a sense of belonging and commitment, a set of goals, and a way of fulfilling personal needs." However, assuming a new social identity is certainly very challenging; it requires undertaking social reconstruction and reproduction processes. One way of doing that is through undertaking a postgraduate study, and subsequently managing the extensive discursive activities or literacy practices associated with that. Assignments, therefore, can be seen as means of application of one or a number of the previously mentioned goals and purposes of the activity and an opportunity to reconstruct and establish, through the use of discourse, a professional social identity associated with these. In line with that, identities, in this case, are one way of looking at 'roles' within the activity. Zimmerman (1998, p. 88) suggests seeing identities as context oriented; he writes "The notion of identities-as-context refers to the way in which the articulation/alignment of discourse and situated identities furnishes for the participants a continuously evolving framework within which their actions... assumes a particular meaning, import and interactional consequentiality".

Although Zimmerman writes about talk-in-interaction, his concept on identity as a context can also be applied to written discourse. New theories on discourse view the written form of language as a form of interaction, where "phenomena such as footing, positioning and voice are realized by visual, lexical and syntactic means... rather than with the additional assistance of prosody or interaction" (Ivanic & Camps, Maclean, 2010, p. 178). Zimmerman's notion of alignment

can be used to measure how close or far students are to conveying the topic of an assignment and thereby achieving the purpose or the goal of this interaction. Alignment is, as well, a precondition to successfully achieve roles/identities that have been, more or less agreed upon. However, the process whereby alignment is achieved between the participants, students and professor(s), in written discourse is very complicated. Because, as Leung (2005, p. 137) explains, any "social interaction between students and teachers is unavoidably influenced by participants' perception of their role and interest in context, participant power differentials, localized social practices and cultural values, and a whole host of other contingent matters, as many...would readily testify." Perhaps, that is why requirement or "entry conditions" and access to such study programmes and the specific modules are extremely selective. Those who are able to grant an access to such programmes are most certainly aware of the challenges involved.

This consequently leads us to the previously mentioned issue of "students as learning consumers" and the debate between observational and cognitive learning theorists. In short, the first theory implies that learning is achieved through observation, while the second assumes the importance of making explicit those processes of decoding and applying knowledge to achieve more effective learning. I support the second stance, which highlights the important role and practices of those who run the taught module since their discursive practices can "feed off and into" the links between students' performance and learning outcomes. This is due to one fact that, if assignments are employed as a) means of application and demonstration of a given knowledge and b) as means of claiming a social identity and personal goals, and c) as means of evaluation of performance of these, then it is important to achieve a certain kind of alignment on "what a given topic and goals of an assignment are." This can be achieved either directly by providing an outline and/or guidelines to follow, as is the case of this assignment or indirectly through linking discursive practices in a given module in a way as to provide cues for students. Thus far, we move to the final segment in the description of the activity.

Sequential Structure or Stages

It is recognized that modules in postgraduate programmes represent well-established systems of knowledge and cultural representations of particular study fields. Thereby, modules are organized to contain a variety of discursive activities that can help students understand these well-established systems of knowledge. However, a vast amount of hours are expected to be spent on private study to achieve specified learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Therefore, students need all means of help to shape and direct their line of thinking and to facilitate their independent or autonomous learning, which will certainly contribute to the production of their current and future academic work. Some of these discursive practices include following and studying assigned reading materials, attending and participating in class discussions. However, since most integral discursive practices in higher education are those based on literacy, it is very important to maintain such a link between students and professors. One way of doing that is through the use of printed materials, such as detailed outlines (which usually list objectives and link detailed summaries of all class sessions) and handouts (which usually introduce and serve as a future reference for students).

It is true that students' ways of managing this order of 'well-established systems of knowledge' differ. Students are most certainly different and thereby differ in their ways of managing and accomplishing the 'task-related activity.' It is very important that they find the 'discursive space' in which they are able to operate. Because, each "discursive space" places students in writing and thereby in a different stance that requires demonstrating a voice that can be either familiar, unfamiliar, or a combination of the two. Accordingly, not only students' ways differ, but also the "discursive space" in which they are able to function, the degree of their struggle and efforts in managing systems of knowledge. Therefore, It is very important to have easily retrievable cues, as means of facilitating their independent studying and learning, and as means of maintaining a link of access to, perhaps, a certain kind of 'alignment' with their

professors, which can be achieved more effectively through written discourse. Together, all of the above-mentioned practices summaries what can be distinguished as two main phases in which the activity is initiated (by those who run the module in class activities where assignments are usually tackled, discussed and agreed upon) and configured (by students in their private study).

DISCUSSION

It is easy to view disciplines as orders that control access to and use of discourse that represents different systems of ideologies, sets of paradigms of 'knowledge.' The exercise of power in this case follows a certain chain, a set of actions upon actions that can only be exercised on free subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 220). According to Foucault (1981, p. 121) disciplines in higher education institutions can be described as systems of 'restriction' and 'exclusion;' he illustrates that "none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so." Accordingly, those who 'apply' to these educational institutions are submitting themselves willingly to this 'order of power,' which, upon admitting them, uses ideology and discourse to objectify, subjugate, and make subject of them. In other words, those who obtained access to the educational institution and the specific study programme are classified as successful candidates, who are privileged to experience knowledge and the related discursive practices in a different way, which will consequently pressure them to 'prove' that they have 'acquired knowledge,' by achieving their assigned roles in the particular activity of writing, the result of which will divide them further according to their performance... etc. In that, it is a never-ending chain of actions upon actions that consequently lead to a never-ending chain of "dividing practices" (Foucault, 1982, p. 208). Moreover, Fairclough (1989, p. 75) description of the 'power behind discourse' can also be applied here to describe disciplines, which, as he explains, use "inculcation...(as a) mechanism... to preserve their power." Exercising what Cameron (1996, p.

47) refers to as "normative pressures, forces that police what is permissible, intelligible and normal." Perhaps inculcation is a two-sided mechanism that is used in most educational institutions; it is a mechanism to pass on power to those who are privileged because they have been chosen to experience it, however, at the same time, it subjugates those individuals, brings them under control through various discursive practices that will eventually shape their future discourse. Certainly, accreditation and certificates can be regarded as prove that this individual 'have successfully been reshaped,' perhaps with performance criteria to determine the degree of successfulness. However, this is a very general account of 'the order of discourse' (Foucault, 1981) or, as Fairclough (1989, p. 75) refers to it, 'the power behind discourse," in which students' main activity is situated.

This takes us back to the notion of the activity as a sight of social struggle. According to Fairclough (1989, p. 74) the notion of "power in discourse" can be used to describe "three types of constraints...(that) powerful participants in discourse can exercise over the contribution of the non-powerful participants; constraints on contents (knowledge and beliefs,) relations (social relationships,) and subjects (social identity)." Although Fairclough lists these as techniques of control used in face-to-face interactions, I find that they are relevant to written discourse in this case of assignments. I have mentioned earlier that new theories on discourse view the written form of language as very interactive since it brings out a number of voices and points of views that achieve similar effects of face-to-face interaction. Therefore, those who have the power can apply these constraints (content, relations and subjects) on students' written discourse by determining the topic and goals of their assignments. This, in turn, determines the 'discursive space,' in which students are positioned and are expected to adapt. Students' social positioning, as Cameron (1996, p. 43) explains, refer to "the activities they are expected to undertake, the personal characteristics they are encouraged to develop, (and) the sources of satisfaction available to them." Struggle, thereby, results from trying to reconstruct and deliver knowledge, social relations, and social identity in a way as to achieve the

goals and purposes of students' social positioning through a written based interaction. What makes it difficult is the fact that in the course of writing the assignment students are no longer students; they are now individuals who are required demonstrate a new social identity associated with one or more of the following; an ability to search, argue, criticize, write and interact fully with the discourse that circulates the particular community of practice. However, this is very difficult since it requires balancing interactional (assigned by those in power) and institutional roles (relevant to their agendas, knowledge, and skills), which, I believe, can only be achieved through providing, what Cameron (1996, p. 43) refers to as, a 'source of satisfaction' that is to provide them with a space in the 'discursive space' in order to help them find a balance, Or through providing cues that simultaneously serve to draw a line of 'alignment' between students and those in power.

CONCLUSION

Considerations of how the two types of power, in and behind discourse, interact have led us to explore what is often thought to be normative or neutral processes. Reflecting and examining such standardized ideologies can lead us to understand the discursive processes in which we are involved in relations of power and struggle, which when addressed can have an impact on individual, institutional, and to some extent societal outcomes, can lead to social change. It is important to stress out the one sidedness of this analysis. The fact remains that those upon whom power is exercised are only able to see the activity from one angle. Although their task-related activity is very much the centre of all the discursive practices associated with their study programme, there remains a whole lot of sub activities that are integral to complete and give the activity its significance. I am by no means criticizing the system of assessments in educational institutions. The purpose of this paper is solely to explain how students access to order of discourse can help them meet the purpose and the goal of their tasks, as well as their long term goals and purposes that they strive to achieve

afterwards. Briggs (1998, p. 543) writes, "If we concern ourselves with this broader sense of consequentiality the impact of a given discursive event on institutional outcomes and on society at large...analyzing how individuals and institutions gain control over practices that shape how discourse is recontextualized seems crucial." 'Community of practice' is, as Saville-Troike (2003, p. 17) explains, used by many to refer to "a group whose joint engagement in some activity or enterprise is sufficiently intensive to give rise over time to a repertoire of shared practices."

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