



ANALYSING POSITIONALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION DISCOURSES: THE CASE FOR TEXTUALLY ORIENTED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (TODA)

Vussy Nkonyane

School of Teacher Education, University of South Africa
PO Box 392, UNISA 0003, South Africa.

Abstract

We do not make sense of ourselves and the world around us arbitrarily, nor do we have a free choice on who or what becomes of us. Positionality plays a critical role in how we deconstruct, reconstruct and construct our identities and understanding of life. This positionality is also not innate, but a socially determined process intentionally aimed and sustained through education and knowledge production. This paper uses the critical emancipatory theory to ground its thesis on the importance of how positionality/ positioning determine the discourses which influence our view and take on life. To achieve this goal, TODA is used in the analysis of a few responses from a group of respondents in two merged universities in the Free State province of South Africa.

Key Words: positionality, discourses, Textual Oriented Discourse Analysis, critical emancipatory theory.

1. Introduction

One of the critical challenges faced by governments in policy implementation is always trying to strike a balance between competing and at times contrasting and conflicting social-interests and wishes in the same country. In a new democratic society like South Africa (SA) this challenge is even more serious due to the unavoidable compelling need to address all the problems of inequality, unemployment and poverty inherited from colonial-apartheid legacy.

Transformation of higher education in SA in the new political dispensation was meant to cast away the suffering and depravation suffered by Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) because of separate development policies and practices of the past. Under these conditions, the HBIs were relegated and condemned to poor quality education due to lack of resources and insufficient funding (Seepe, 2004). They were meant to cater for the very few people from Black communities who could afford the financial demands of higher education. These were basically teaching universities as research never formed part of their curriculum. With infrastructural development, excessive and unsustainable student numbers and financial constraints, the quality of scholarship production from these institutions was always under suspicion (Slavin & Madden, 2000). Nevertheless, these institutions outperformed themselves as they were able to produce international personalities like Nelson Mandela. Transformation of higher education, in the form of merging the HBIs and Historically White Institutions (HWIs) was therefore a necessity and meant to take the HBIs back into the centre of knowledge production, thus high quality education. This would normally suggest that Historically Black Institutions are automatic beneficiaries in terms of the positive spin-offs arising from the transformative policies of the new democratic order (Makgoba, 2003). A simple yes or no response cannot do justice to this statement, nor can unanimity be reached on such a debate. It could be easy to suggest race/racism as a cause for such varying and conflicting views on the same debate because of our inherited legacy. But this hypothesis is swiftly nullified by the realization that the different races are not unanimous within themselves on the same question.

In a study by Nkonyane (2008) the use of study guides at higher education institutions by academics/lecturers in teaching and learning was utilized to initiate debates on the transformation of higher education. The study guide is not really at issue here, except that it is used as a metaphor for tapping into the feelings, views, hopes and fears of affected academics by the merging of the HBIs and the HWIs. The academic's discussions/discourses were critically interrogated through Foucault's Textually Oriented Discourse Analysis (TODA) to show how positionality influences people's perceptions and attitudes in life. This was meant to find out if there were any problems in the merged institutions of higher education or not.

Positionality is according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1986) an act of lying down or stating a position or thesis. It is also seen as an assertion, statement or the proper response to a subject or topic. Another definition is that positioning is the ground or point of view adopted with reference to a particular subject. For this paper positionality is a mental attitude, a way of viewing or thinking about something. Positionality is used to describe how people are defined, that is not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed. Maher and Tetreault (1994) gives positionality another dimension when he defines it as the learner's specific position in any context as defined by race, gender, class, and other socially significant dimensions. They argue that historical, political, social, and cultural factors position people even before they are born. How we perceive and interpret the world is not an innocent practice, but rather it depends on social negotiations and hegemonic strategies of representation. Such perception refers to representation as a discursive formation, embedded in the logic of the production of truth. It is therefore possible for researchers with very similar grounding, both their teaching practices and theory, to talk about them quite differently. I believe this is the direct result of their differences in positionality by race, gender, and class, in combination with personality differences. In research, positionality leads to subjectivity which refers to the life experiences that researchers have had as well as the social, cultural, and political factors that influence an individual and how those experiences and factors contribute to biases and assumptions in the

type of research that researchers choose to engage in. Moreover, subjectivity influences how researchers analyze and interpret their research. The question of objectivity as the golden rule of science, especially under the positivistic paradigm, is.

2. Positionality And Identity

In the same study of (Nkonyane, 2008) the academics of the same institution took two different forms of identities that to a large extent were informed by social context, race, and class. This was against conventional ethnographic tendencies to understand the individual as being singularly and autonomously located. Oppositional ethnography on the other hand, assumes identities are created in the intersection of multiple discursive fields, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, political context, social context, geographical location, temporal location, etc. (Tsing, 1993). Tsing's argument explains why some academics from the dominated culture agree in a way that portrays them as supporting or belonging to the dominant culture. Baaz's explanation of the relationship between identity and positioning supports Tsing's assumption that identity formulation is not an arbitrary process, but conforms and confirms positionality:

identity (who we are) is about being positioned in a particular (subject) position. This process of positioning cannot be understood outside discourse and power. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they (identities) are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in recovery of the past, which is awaiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names that we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (2001: 2-6).

The categorization of the academics into two different forms of identities in the concerned institutions of higher learning is determined or dependent on the discursive possibilities available and change overtime according to the political context and historical connotations of identifiers (Zavella, 1996). Identity, thus, becomes constituted in the midst of multiple power relations. According to Williams (1996) these relations of power shape how and to what extent an identity can be affixed but they do not shape to what extent it is fixed. In other words, one's identity is not a totality, but a partial representation of multiple discourses (Visweswaran, 1994). Consequently, according to Narayan (1997), different aspects of identity become highlighted at different times, depending on the context and prevailing vectors of power. Identity, in this reading, signifies a contextual, shifting, partial location that is continually formed and reformed or constructed and deconstructed. In this paper most of the interviewed Black academics identified themselves as the dominated culture, marginalized and disadvantaged group. Apple explains how this process happens when he says:

The decision to define some groups' knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups' knowledge hardly sees the light of the day, says something extremely important about who has power in society, what counts as knowledge, the ways in which it is organized, who is empowered to teach it, and just as critically – who is allowed to ask and answer all these questions, are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in this society (1996: 2).

In Lacanian language, the Oedipal aspirations of the child are thwarted by the intervention of the father in the process known as castration. In this process the child is prevented from fulfilling its desire to be the phallic object to its mother by indicating to him the impossibilities of the satisfaction of its incestuous wishes. Lacan argues that the father is symbolic and is therefore the social Law or the 'Other'. Accepted and successful castration guarantees the child that when the time comes, and if it plays by the rules, it can at least have a satisfying substitute for its first love – object. This, Lacan calls a symbolic identification with an 'ego ideal'. Lacan is used here to indicate that identity formulation in the case at hand has been a prerogative and exclusively performed by the father, the 'Other', the social Law. The academics' subalternity is not self-made but is a positioning by contemporary dominant discourses. Lacan calls this symbolic identification, which is identification with and within something that cannot be seen, touched, devoured, or mastered: namely, the words, norms and directories of its given cultural collective (discourses).

3. Critical Theory and Positioning

The study about the merging of universities conducted by Nkonyane (2008) on which this paper is based used critical emancipatory theory as a theoretical framework. Kincheloe and McLaren in Zou and Trueba (2002) regard critical emancipatory theory as a paradigm that focuses on critical values and has an emancipatory interest in eliminating the social and political constraints that distort rational self-understanding. It sees knowledge and interest, value and fact, object and subject as being closely interconnected. With empowerment as its metaphor, this paradigm sees education as preparing individuals capable of producing and transforming a given form of social life. It stimulates human agents to take an active stand towards social development and urges self-reflection as a primary path by which one could recognize the interconnectedness referred to above (Geuss, 1999). Critical theory enabled the researcher to understand first, his positioning in various contexts. The researcher is a middle class Black African who was pursuing studies at a merged institution of higher education with lecturers from both the dominant and dominated cultures then. The researcher had life experiences and historical contexts that also factored into his positionality. Understanding his positionality was crucial for the researcher to understand the subjectivity of researchers. Much as the researcher conducted this investigation on the affected academics, he was inherently researching on himself; he was part of the study. This cast away objectivity, the golden rule of science in positivistic research. Secondly, through the lens of positionality, critical theory explained why the academics at the site of the study regarded themselves as the dominated culture and the marginal and disadvantaged group. And the fact that the staff of the institution was dominated by one group of upper class males could also be considered as a factor in the positioning of the other people.

Critical theory empowers the subject to self-critique and discover how they can move towards emancipating themselves (Geuss, 1999). This consciousness is important because it helps them realize that their status of subjugation is

not innate or self-inflicted, but due to positioning by the past, culture, politics, socioeconomic and other related factors. Fanon sums it up when he says:

I came into the world with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the others fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye (1992:220).

With its stated empowerment and emancipatory intentions critical theory enables the subaltern culture to understand its positioning against the background of higher education policies in post – democratic South Africa, but also to see beyond the policies and their unveiling in terms of discursive practices and spaces in their positioning in knowledge-power relations. Empowerment raises the awareness and consciousness of the dominated in the study to see beyond their present positioning of marginalization and thereby overcome the victim-hood attitude and start to realize possibilities and opportunities under the same conditions of powerlessness.

4. Discourse and Positioning

Discourses, as referred to in this paper, are modalities that, to a significant extent, govern what can be said by what kind of speakers and for what type of imagined audiences. They are social practices that constitute both social subjects and objects of their investigation (van Dijk, 2006). The rules of discourses are normative and derive their meaning from the power relations of which they are a part, that is, discourses organize a way of thinking into a way of doing. They actively shape the practices that discourses serve. Discourses, according to Foucault in Weedon, refers to:

Ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the nature of the body, the unconscious and conscious mind, and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (1987:108)

Based on Foucault's definition of discourses, it is safe to conclude that discourses are not only about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships, and they also constitute both subjectivity and power relations. "Subject", to Foucault, carries the twin meaning of an active knowing subject, and of an object being acted upon – in other words a product of discourse. In epistemological terms, the subject both speaks, and is spoken of. This is what Foucault (ibid) calls as man in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject who knows. The discourses going on in the Free State higher education institutions after the merger of the formerly Black and formerly White institutions confirm exactly what is suggested by Foucault as functions of discourses. The same study guide as a best tool so far for facilitating teaching and learning is viewed differently by the academics in these institutions (this should not persuade us away from the primary importance and the indispensability of study guides). The discourses in these institutions are influenced and informed by the positionality of the two groups – one dominated and the other operating from a dominant position (van Dijk, 2011). As much as positioning is regarded and created by discourse, it should be argued that positioning does create and influence discourse which in turn is created by power. Diamond and Quinby are more direct and clearer on this ambiguity, incompleteness and fluidity of discourse when they define it aptly as "a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance" (1988: 185). The problem at play here is not the study guide per se as indicated earlier on in the paper, but the different positioning of the research participants by the ambiguity, incompleteness and the fluidity of the prevalent discourses.

5. Textually Oriented Discourse Analysis (TODA)

Textually Oriented Discourse Analysis or TODA as is commonly called, derives from discourse analysis which is the study of language as action in social contexts. According to Davies and Harre, (1990); Gee, (1999); Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates, (2002), discourse analysis is a method of investigating the back – and – forth dialogues that constitute social action, along with the patterns of signification and representation that constitute culture. Gee (1999:63) states that:

meaning is not general and abstract, not something that resides in dictionaries, or even in general symbolic representations inside people's heads. Rather, its situated in specific social and cultural practices, and it is continually transformed in those practices.

Discourse analysis is therefore attentive to the use of language and how those uses position speakers in relation to others, both those who are physically present and those who belong to larger categories of others (i.e. social groups) (Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis (2000) . In support of this, Evans (2002) argues that language is conceptualized as historically and socially situated, and discourse analysis is concerned with how ideologies are communicated and what the multiple effects of that communication might be.

6. WHAT IS TODA?

As a derivative of discourse analysis, TODA is a system that takes its form of analysis as a narrative practice that is institutionally bound, discursively situated and geopolitically located Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis (2000). As a critical postcolonial ethnographic data analysis technique at the present historical moment, it is not simply another means of constructing knowledge of the partial, the particular and the contingent, but rather a new form of theoretical practice that can engage difference without absorbing, accommodating, homogenizing or integrating it into totalizing schemes of essentialist ethnographic practices. In emphasizing the above Young (1990:119) says that:

we need to resist facile forms of postmodern detailism and refuse the appropriation of difference into totalizing identities by ontologizing Otherness and thereby sublating the other within self-possession by using its own alterity and duplicity to effect its deconstruction.

In elucidating the above, Mahlomaholo (1998) posits that TODA technique looks at what the respondent says as text. That text is, therefore, used by the researcher as evidence to substantiate conclusions drawn about the discursive practices informing the construction and production thereof, as well as the very basic and deep social structured issues grounding both discursive practices and the text.

The study by Nkonyane (2008) in which TODA was used to analyse data collected from respondents through interviews, successfully demonstrated that discourse and positionality/positioning are two interdependent and intertwined phenomena. The analysis of the texts from these interviews indicated that there were discourses going on in the institutions of higher learning in Free State province of South Africa on the merging of the universities. The interviewed academics were positioned in two different categories, viz. the dominant and the dominated discourses. The view of the dominant discourse was that study guides were not partisan in the whole debate and contestations going on in the institutions. But the opposite was true of the dominated group who saw study guides as embedded in the socio-political processes of the institutions. To them, knowledge was not neutral, hence the study guide which facilitated the distribution of this knowledge. Among other things they cited their non-involvement in the compilation of the same learning and teaching materials and the absence of content on Indigenous Knowledges as indication of how study guides were not representative of all stakeholders' views of knowledge in the institutions. This view is supported by Nzimande (2001) who argues that education is not a neutral phenomenon but a form of ideology. He regards it as one of the most crucial vehicles for shaping broader societal values. It is always a carrier of particular messages, both explicitly and implicitly. The following responses from interviews were used by the researcher and subjected under TODA to find out whether it could assist in enabling him to identify the positionality of the respondents.

R4: As far as learning guides are concerned, as you know, under the University of the North in the past we used to refer our students to the library for writing their assignments, but with the study guides that we are using at the moment and as you know that they have done away with all the teaching material that was used by the former university, with this new university we received readymade material and sources attached to the learning guide. Most of the sources from this university are from a certain group of authors, like Potchefstroom and Stellenbosch and so on. I ask myself where are authors from Wits, Cape Town University and University of KwaZulu Natal for instance with liberal thinking? So it's a problem to me because I am a student of these liberal institutions and I know their approach. They believe in meta-theory, and with this one its fundamental pedagogic which is more Christian based and believes in absolute knowledge. So their materials encourage our students to memorize the absolute global or wide thinking and get information from different theorists or scientists.

R4: Definitely they exclude eh... because if you look at these learning guides you'll find that they follow what has been done in the previously white institutions. There is very little of what was done in the historically black institutions. They definitely exclude black culture in terms of learning. They further what has been done in white institutions. I have had exposure to them. They are such that the senior lecturer/professor in that department compile the learning guide and all the lecturers have to follow it – everything like tests, memoranda come from the mother campus. As a lecturer you cannot ask your learners some questions, why, because you want to evaluate your own learners. You make no inputs. You teach following the guide and mark scripts following the memo. There is an aim in this. They are excluding something. They are preventing you from putting in your own views, if you want your ideas to be followed to the latter, you'll do that. You compile the learning guide, the questions, the memo, and then you get the facilitator who is just going to push all what you do and everything comes back to you for moderation. So there is definitely exclusion.

From the above two texts it is clear that the respondents belong to the dominated, marginal and disadvantaged social group. Their sentiments have undertones of exclusion and domination.

R6: Under the learning guides you cannot make your own inputs, views and opinions, unless you become irrelevant to the tests and examples set by the Head at main campus. For example, you ask this question: "Adolescence is a stage of storm and stress", critically analyze this. They fail to do so. The study guide's question says: Adolescence is a stage of and, go to page 10 for answers.

R1: My view is that we actually have not emerged from the past, not yet. The problems of immersion, of being bogged down, of being pulled by the dominant discourse in the past are still very dominant in this county. The discourses that are dominating in our everyday life and practices dictate as to the positioning and particular ways of that what are not accepted, especially those that contradict the current liberal philosophies are simply pushed aside or at worst thrown out of the social. What is tolerated is that which is dominant and goes along with the dominant discourses of neo-liberalism which is fairly most capitalist, so anything that runs contra or does not promote that alternative, is relegated to the margin.

R4: I believe in multicultural education simply because South Africa is a diverse society. But what is happening in our university, everything is based on one culture. Yesterday my students were complaining that most sources in the learning guide are in Afrikaans, to tell them to read those books and translate theme into English is very difficult and unfair. The other issue is that of those authors, where have they done their research on the books, it is likely they have done it among themselves, so, the book itself is not based on black culture, and it is from the "utopian world". Another factor that contributes to the content of books becoming exclusive is that they are outdated for the new dispensation since they were written during the old order, before 1994.

R5: Black culture is excluded because in all courses except for Sesotho, the compilers of learning guides are white and use white written books in production of modules. The compiler and the author come from the same background. The black lecturer does not feature anywhere in the process. The lecturer is then forced to teach learning on something that he feels differently about, and for the sake of passing them he dies that even though he sees that this is learning them astray.

From the above text it was easy for the researcher to deduce that the respondents were from the dominated discourse. Most of their responses were informed by their positioning in the discourses going on in the university. At

times positionality results in the victim-hood syndrome and the culture of entitlement on the positionally dominated culture. This is the feeling of helplessness, hopelessness and fear. Instead, the disadvantaged positioning should be the very basis and reason why those in that category should be strong and more determined to engage in self-empowerment process for their emancipation.

7. Conclusion

Positionality is dangerous when it becomes internalized because then it becomes the only window/lens through which one looks at the world/reality. In its internalized form, positionality attains ideological status which is self-perpetual wherein like a locomotive, the subject can only move in and within the confines of the prevailing state of affairs (thinking inside the box). Under such conditions, the world is accepted as a given that needs to be explored in order to discover the underlying or hidden wealth of knowledge. The locomotive in these conditions can move only on or within the rail line, and that is the only way it can reach its desired destination.

Critical emancipatory theory suggests that the opposite of the above argument is also true. It sees the world, knowledge, reality or the truth as being made by those who inhabit it for their own benefit. Critical theory subscribes to the old English saying that “there are many ways of killing a cat” and that all depends on the given circumstances. It sees possibilities where none seem to exist. It believes that everybody has strength and potential to contribute towards the common good of all and social advancement. Any form of identity is not regarded as problematic and fixed but understood as cause for successful human interaction and social experience, this allowing spaces and crevices for deconstruction, reconstruction and construction of ourselves and destinies. The hydrogen atom alone could not form water, hence the need for the oxygen atom.

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