Chapter 10
Exploring Higher Education Students' Technological Identities using Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This chapter applies a critical theory lens to understanding how South African university students construct meaning about the role of ICTs in their lives. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been used as a theoretical and analytical device drawing on theorists Fairclough and Gee to examine the key concepts of meaning, identity, context, and power. The specific concepts that inform this study are Fairclough's three-level framework that enables the situating of texts within the socio-historical conditions and context that govern their process, and Gee's notion of D(d)iscourses and conceptualization of grand societal "Big C" Conversations. This approach provides insights into students' educational and social identities and the position of globalisation and the information society in both facilitating and constraining students' participation and future opportunities. The research confirms that the majority of students regard ICTs as necessary, important, and valuable to life. However, it reveals that some students perceive themselves as not being able to participate in the opportunities technology could offer them. In contrast to government rhetoric, ICTs are not the answer but should be viewed as part of the problem. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of power as a choice under constraint, this methodological approach also enables examination of how students are empowered or disempowered through their Discourses about ICTs.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, there is a paucity of research from the perspective of students as participants embedded in the setting of the higher education institution (Selwyn, 2006). It has been argued that such a situated approach is essential to understanding how Information Systems (IS) are used within an organisation (Johnson & Aragon 2003) as it avoids universalistic assumption of knowledge and value and instead examines meaning, legitimacy and value at an individual level (Avgerou & Madon, 2004).

The motivation for this research arose from a study of South African university students' access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for learning at university. In this project, students' attitudes towards ICTs were overwhelmingly positive with quantitative data showing students thought ICTs were essential for education and a positive benefit to their learning proving to be an enabler in the take up of ICTs for e-learning (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2009). However, in a society such as South Africa with a history based on inequality and a growing and increasingly diverse student body (Cooper & Subotzky, 2001) in a sector only recently restructured towards transformation and operating for the most part under significant resources constraints (Steyn & de Villiers, 2007), it seemed curious that students attitudes could be so similar and so positive.

Consequently, research was undertaken to better understand what meaning (conceptualized broadly as values, assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, experience) ICTs have for students within their local context and the broader national higher education community.

BACKGROUND TO CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN IS RESEARCH

The research described in this chapter is situated within the sphere of Critical Theory. Although critical IS research is characterized by a "diversity of topics, objectives, methods and philosophical roots," it does have certain basic assumptions (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2005, p. 20). In describing these, many authors have drawn on Alvesson and Deetz's three concerns, namely insight, critique, and transformative redefinitions (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2005; Howcroft & Trauth, 2005; McGrath, 2005).

Whilst Critical Theory approaches are starting to take a modest but firm hold within Information Systems, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is still in its infancy (Alvarez, 2005). Discourse analysis plays a role in understanding people's interaction with ICTs, and can aid in interpreting the hidden meaning about ICTs and in understanding what ICTs are, how they can be used and how different interpretations affect use (Stahl, 2004).

Discourse analysis becomes critical when it seeks to analyze power relationships in society and it is often used in IS to criticize the status quo (particularly exclusion), for example the digital divide (Kvasny & Trauth, 2002). The dominant approach in IS, is perhaps more aptly described as a critical analysis of discourse, as it draws directly on critical theorists (usually Habermas, but to some extent Foucault) and does not form part of the more linguistically-oriented field of CDA..

Two researchers who are key in operationalizing a Habermasian approach to critical discourse analysis within IS are Cukier (Cukier, Bauer, & Middleton, 2004; Cukier, Ngwenyama, Bauer, & Middleton, 2009) and Stahl (2004, 2008a). Cukier and her colleagues have developed an approach to CDA which draws explicitly on Habermas' validity claims. They present an analysis of media discourses around a Canadian technology project