Discourse as evidence: making space for critical discourse analysis (CDA) in adult educational research

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Introduction
Discourse analysis has undergone several transformations in recent years. These conceptual and methodological shifts continue to define the way discourse critique is understood and applied in educational research. According to MacLure (2003), linguistics and poststructuralism are two leading traditions currently informing the theory and practice of discourse analysis in the field of education. Luke (1995) and others (Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2004) recognize critical discourse analysis (CDA) as another framework influencing educational research. CDA, with its explicitly political agenda, is beginning to emerge in adult education scholarship and show promise for adult educators to examine the micro and macro politics of our everyday texts (Niewolny and Wilson, 2008). While only a handful of adult educators have shown interest in CDA (see Ayers, 2005; Gibb, 2008; Niewolny and Wilson, 2007), this paper outlines the significance of making space for CDA in adult educational research. The paper specifically illustrates how CDA can enable adult educators to set and reach critical goals in research because of its unique configuration of critical linguistic and (post)structuralist approaches to discourse.

A Brief Review of CDA
The study of discourse has been largely informed by the ‘linguistic turn’ in the humanities and social sciences (Lee and Poynton, 2000). Subsequent changes in the theories and methods of discourse critique in recent years has mostly produced analyses that are either influenced by the techniques of linguistic discourse analysis or the conceptual foundations of poststructuralism (MacLure, 2003). According to Luke (1995), CDA is a contemporary framework that attempts to break out of this linguistic/poststructural binary. Although it is difficult to treat CDA as a unified project, it is often referred to as a theory and method for exploring how the textual practices of day-to-day life are intertwined with the social and institutional dimensions of discourse and power (Luke, 1995). While CDA is largely focused on the study of texts and language use, the analytical focus is not limited to textual forms of discourse, as it is defined by modernist frameworks (Barker and Galasiński, 2001). Writers associated with the
development of CDA also draw upon the concept of discourse in various ways, including discourse as language-in-use (e.g., spoken and written), discourse as a signification of experience from a particular perspective (e.g., discourse of learning), and discourse as a social practice that constitutes meaning and regulates conduct in society (e.g., neoliberal economic discourse) (Mills, 2004). For Fairclough (1992) and (Gee, 1999), discourse has a deeply hegemonic function and can be generally defined as language use as social practice. Discourse in this particular view recognizes the micro-analytical descriptions of what people ‘say and do’ and how these textual practices are embedded within and constituted by social relations power. With such features as these, CDA highlights the relationship among the textual or linguistic features of a discourse event (e.g., teacher talk in a classroom), the political processes of text production and distribution within and across a set of discourse events (e.g., identity formation in higher education), and the relations of power that constitute the discourse events in context to the social practices in which they are embedded (e.g., neoliberal marketization in lifelong learning policy) (Fairclough, 1992).

A critical agenda underlies the CDA framework, enabling researchers to pose questions of politics and resistance. According to Fairclough (2003), CDA provides the conceptual and methodological footing for researchers of social practice and justice to examine the way social and cultural relations of discourse and power are constituted, reinscribed, and resisted through written and spoken texts, as to reveal social inequalities that oppress human capabilities. CDA particularly aims to describe how discourse practices can variously and inequitably constitute the formation of social identity, voice, and experience. Or in other words, as depicted by Luke (2002, pp. 104), CDA can enable us to illustrate how ‘discourse systemically constructs human subjects, versions of ‘reality,’ relations of power and knowledge…’ In this view, CDA recursively moves between the micro and macro analyses of discourse and power, with a particular focus on practices of representation (Barker and Galasiński, 2001). For Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), CDA provides a dialectical or mediated explanation for the way discourse constitutes social identities and realities. These authors argue that individuals are involved in constructing the discourse(s) they participate within; the subject position an individual takes-up is not over-determined but contingent and flexible. As such, elements of personal choice and creativity are involved in identity formation, yet the ‘creativity of the subject’ is socially determined in the way that such creativity is fashioned in and with social practice (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 172). This dialectal view of discourse is related to Fairclough’s (1992) assumption that discourse is socially constitutive and a manifestation of larger relations of power and interests.

developments coming out of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, particularly through Gramscian hegemony theory, neo-Marxist cultural theory, and poststructural discourse theory (Threadgold, 2003). According to Luke (2002), CDA theory and practice mostly stems from European and Australian academies; however, scholarship in North America is beginning to show promise for the continued development of CDA concepts and procedures. The techniques of CDA are also informed by various disciplines and linguistic-based approaches. CDA methods are generally rooted in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978) to explain how texts are not only multifunctional but are socially and ideologically produced.

CDA has now moved from the one time marginal spaces in academic circles and more toward central locations, albeit not without difficulty in defining a normative methodological blueprint. It has particularly gained the attention of educators in recent years. Education researchers are applying CDA in a range of formal and informal learning settings (Rogers, 2004). CDA has largely influenced educational research in the areas of literacy education (Gee, 1996; Luke, 1995; Rogers, 2003) and policy studies (Fairclough, 1995; Jessop, Fairclough, and Wodak, 2008). With this growing interest in CDA, several conceptual and methodological interpretations exist. Rogers, Malancharuvi-Berkes, Mosely, Hui, and Joseph (2005, pp. 376) reviewed CDA in the education literature and offer four themes that currently define CDA design and purpose: CDA functions as a political platform to examine textual practices of education; it is closely associated with Foucauldian poststructuralism; CDA stems from critical linguistics; and it is frequently linked to Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional theory of discourse. Although many writers emphasize various concepts and procedures, Rogers et al. (2005) point out that a centering theme of CDA application in education is its ability to link the macro and micro elements of the production, use, and effects of texts so as to examine power relations and how they work across our educational structures and practices. McGregor (2003) and Rogers (2004) also argue that CDA characteristically sets out to critically and precisely investigate the ways in which larger formations of power are produced and circulated in our everyday educational settings. In more detail, Luke (1995) further emphasizes how CDA distinctively brings together textual modes of analysis with social and cultural theory for elucidating how larger forms of knowledge and power are reproduced in the local sites of schooling and learning.

**Adult Educational Applications of CDA**

While discourse analysis is nothing new to adult educators (see Nicoll and Harrison, 2003, Usher and Edwards, 2007; Wilson and Cervero, 1997), the theory of CDA and its methodology are only beginning to emerge in adult education scholarship. This growing area of research largely concentrates on the construction and effects of various discourses and discourse practices in such areas as continuing and community education (Irving and English, 2008), higher education (Ayers, 2005), literacy and numeracy education
(Oughton, 2007; Rogers, 2003), distance and online learning (Dieter, 2007, Kelland, 2006), education policy making (Gibb, 2008), and farm worker education (Niewolny and Wilson, 2007). Despite differences in the conceptual and methodological application of CDA, these analyses commonly seek to examine the production, interpretation, and/or use of texts in order to unmask hidden discursive-ideological meanings and effects. For example, Irving and English (2008) draw upon CDA to examine the discursive manifestation of 'partnership' in research, and how the creation of this discourse affects not only the research process but the knowledge generation process, particularly as it has an effect on feminist researchers of adult education. From the viewpoint of methodology, the authors center on previous, collaborative-based adult education research experiences within Canada using an array of data sources that fall under such genres as organizational websites, academic literature reviews, and governmental reports. Borrowing largely from Foucault’s (1980) notion of discourse as power/knowledge, Irving and English (2008, pp. 107) explore the social and historical relations of power that constitute what they refer to as the 'phenomenon of coerced partnership.' While other CDA insights are mentioned, what stands out in this research is the heavy influence of poststructural discourse theory.

Most adult education research explicitly draws upon CDA theory and method associated with Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2001, 2003). For Gibb (2008), Fairclough (2001) is the starting point for examining the discursive construction of immigrant subjectivity in a selection of Canadian second language and workplace learning policies. Here the author reveals the predominance of knowledge economy and human capital theory discourses to the exclusion of the more socially constituted aspects of learning. Using an array of Fairclough’s (2001) concepts and technical procedures, Gibbs (2008, pp. 321) uncovers ‘underlying assumptions about the subjectivity construction of workers and immigrants’ in connection with larger social relations of power embedded within the production of the policies, particularly relations of power that are rooted in a neoliberal economic agenda. In a similar but distinctively different vein, Ayers (2005) draws heavily upon the theoretical foundation of Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional framework to examine mission statements for the institutional formations of power that textually construct the ‘ideal’ learner subject position. Focusing mostly on the ‘social practice’ elements of Fairclough’s (1992) framework, Ayers (2005) not only reveals the dominance of neoliberal ideology in community college policy but specifically illustrates how the textual formation of rational, economic identities of learners is constituted by such higher levels of social structuring.

As the above efforts illustrate, CDA help us as adult educators creatively and effectively understand the social and cultural conditions in which we operate, who benefits from these situations, and what might be done to reduce power imbalances as a result of those discursive situations. Drawing upon earlier
efforts (Niewolny and Wilson, 2007; 2008), I further argue that many possibilities exist for using CDA theory and methodology to achieve these critical aims. I know turn to some personal insights of conducting CDA in hope that such reflections of theory and method add to the purpose and refinement of CDA in adult education.

Reflections on CDA
Building on previous CDA experience within the context of farmer/farm worker education in the United States (Niewolny and Wilson, 2007; Niewolny, forthcoming) and a review of discourse analysis in adult education (Niewolny and Wilson, 2008), I briefly draw attention to theoretical/methodological integration of linguistic and poststructural traditions. This larger theme has been the subject of many critiques of CDA in recent years (MacLure, 2003). Attempts to define CDA as an amalgamation of linguistic/social theory are many and more adequately do a better job than what is presented here. Instead of discussing those efforts, I draw attention to the combined efforts of Fairclough (1992) and Foucault (1972, 1980) as one thread that is building momentum in CDA circles.

With several versions of CDA in circulation, it is the joint scholarship of Fairclough (1992) and Foucault (1972, 1980) that has become increasingly influential to address the linkages between the micro and macro politics of our everyday texts. Drawing specifically upon Niewolny and Wilson (2007), CDA in this view takes into account the constitutive features of discourse and the heterogeneous and historicized nature of texts (Foucault, 1972), and the concrete instances of textual, discursive, and social dimensions of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992). With Foucault (1972) as the starting point, a critical analysis of discourse is concerned with the historical investigation of power and the formation of subject positions (e.g., ‘ideal’ learner), objects of discourse (e.g., participation), and the concepts and strategies that constrain certain possibilities through that discourse (e.g., literacy education and policy). Discourse is thus linked to larger social institutions, such as education, and to the ‘disciplines’ that regulate and legitimate the ‘conduct’ of people associated with those institutions (MacLure, 2003, pp. 176). Fairclough (1992) draws upon these transformative or constitutive features of discourse to help move us toward the sociohistorical critique of cultural activity as developed more broadly by poststructuralist theories, which are traditionally weak in sociolinguistic views of discourse analysis. Yet Fairclough (1992) provides a linguistic translation of these features because while a **Foucauldian** discourse analysis itself is an effective form of political practice, this framework alone lacks the analytical procedures to explain how our everyday practices of speech and writing are embedded within and constituted by larger social discourses and political interests. Fairclough does not suggest, however, that one should simply reduce discourse analysis to a lexical or thematic analysis of language use; instead, ‘the issue is rather whether [the] analysis should include actual instances of discourse’ (1992, pp. 56). As such, he and others (Luke, 1995) purport incorporating the constructive features of discourse as explained by Foucault in conjunction
Putting together these and other understandings of discourse analysis leads to some negotiation of an underlying analytical framework to arrive at CDA goals. That is, some authors (see MacLure, 2003; Pennycook, 1994) argue that tensions exist between Foucault’s and Fairclough’s general approaches, tensions that make integrating them difficult based on ontological and epistemological reasons. For example, the relationship between human agency and social structure is an ongoing debate between poststructural and neo-Marxist camps (Luke, 1995) that is central to this discussion. Although the conjunction of Fairclough’s (1992) and Foucault’s (1972) positions on discourse leads to some disagreements, I argue that their conceptual ideas can be brought together to move us towards critically analyzing discourse and language as linked together and to wider social structures. Put another way, as depicted by Fairclough’s (1992, pp. 62) criticisms of Foucault (1972), bringing these ideas together can potentially ‘strengthen social analysis’ by increasing our attention to the specific instances of discourse practice and the ‘textual forms and processes’ associated with them. In this view, Luke (1995, pp. 10) draws upon Foucault’s poststructuralism and several linguistic features in the tradition of Fairclough (1992) to articulate his approach to CDA, which has gained attention for bridging together what he calls the ‘macro approaches to discourse with more microanalytical text analyses’. In agreement with Luke (1995, 2002) and others (Barker and Galasiński, 2001), I put forward that what is important about this approach to CDA is its ability to move us closer to precisely illustrating how the discursive construction of cultural practices, such as adult education, are achieved in the social activities of day-to-day life.

**Conclusion**

This paper illustrates that while taking on a CDA project is not a neat or simple task, it is one that holds promise for adult educators to investigate the discursive production of power in the everyday settings adults learn. I have also tried to illustrate how CDA provides adult educators with a political platform to operate from to meet critical goals in research and instruction. My aim here is not to formulate a set of procedures, but rather to carefully review key principles, methods, and conceptual orientations in order to refine theoretical/methodological possibilities of CDA in adult education research. I particularly point toward opportunities for applying CDA to adult education questions by analytically accounting for the interconnectedness of Foucault’s (1972) early writing on discourse and Fairclough’s (1992) framework that calls attention to the concrete instances of textual, discursive practice, and social practice dimensions of discourse analysis. It is my hope that further debate and discussion about these issues follow.

**References**


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