Working through language: researching the ‘organising texts’ of lifelong learning

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Introduction
This paper demonstrates the critical application of a theoretical concept and the research design it informs to some current issues in lifelong learning: despite the growth and popularity of lifelong learning as a major educational field, there continue to be - for some groups of learners - issues of educational exclusion or marginalisation. Whilst ongoing issues of exclusion are recognised in some lifelong learning discourses, what of the learners who continue to face exclusion? What can research and researchers do to interrogate the constructions of such learners that create them as excluded?

Concurring with Burke & Jackson’s (2007 p9) claim that lifelong learning research is ‘un(der)theorised’, I offer a different theoretical approach, one that addresses the limitations of the conceptual framework created by current approaches, and that presents a different perspective on how concerns relating to marginalised learner groups are understood. The paper argues that current discursive constructions of lifelong learning operate to further marginalise or exclude groups of learners, and that effective research practices must be developed that take into account and make visible the structures that proscribe exclusion.

A research design and methodology used to investigate mature women’s experiences of vocational education in Australia is described, showing how exclusionary assumptions that are embedded in language can be made visible. Using Smith’s (1999) notion of organising texts, this research revealed not only different perspectives to those assumed in lifelong learning’s discursive framework, but also some findings that offered alternative notions of the purpose and value of learning.

The nature of exclusionary organisational language
Lifelong learning is an important field of education. According to Jackson (2005) ‘everyone is doing it’ (p1) but, as she notes, some are doing it easier than others. Others share Jackson’s concerns: international literature charts both the growth of lifelong learning and its limitations as an educational system that claims to include everyone (see for example Biesta 2006; Blackmore 2006; Gouthro 2005).
The language that accompanies lifelong learning's conceptual framework both describes and proscribes the purpose, goals and values of the field. Yet a pervasive set of assumptions shapes lifelong learning language, driven by an emphasis on economic progress over social development (Biesta 2006). As Smith (1999) observes ‘(i)deologies, theories and concepts generate texts’ (p157) and we know that interpretation and implementation occur primarily through these texts, as the written or spoken word: text and language are the vehicles that simultaneously define, confine and exclude experiences and our ability to know them. Smith (1999) calls these *organising texts*. Both this educational field and its participants therefore, are organised - through policy and practice - by a powerful discursive framework that normalises the prominence of economic interests and offers specific constructions of participation and learning. In other words, *organising texts* produce a conceptual space within which there can be only certain ways of understanding the world: in this instance the world of lifelong learning.

Conditions of inclusion and exclusion have developed through such discursive practices (Burke & Jackson 2007; Brine 2006; Daniels 2008a). Brine’s (2006) textual analysis of European lifelong learning policies identifies the marginalisation of some groups of learners and illustrates the role that language plays in this. Brine identifies the division of learners into ‘those that know’ and ‘those that do not know’ (2006 p651), through a language binary that simultaneously evaluates and excludes. In fact, lifelong learning's *organising texts* become for some learners ‘a mechanism for exclusion and social control’ (Jackson 2005 p1). Mature-age women learners are one such group identified by Brine (2006), and this learner group was also the focus of my research.

The governance of women by masculinist concepts of knowledge operates on many levels: nationally, locally, socially and institutionally. Education is no exception, and there are implications for women in a gendered organised system regarding naming their own experiences. *Organising texts* create a knowledge base that frames what lifelong learning is all about, and within this framework are notions of what mature women want and need, and what opportunities and benefits they receive from participation. Embedded in this conceptual framing is the belief that issues can be investigated in relation to existing organisational structures. Smith (1990) contends that it is necessary to be able to *step outside* these structures in order to critically investigate what is happening inside. To take the existing framework as a starting point for research would merely reinscribe the omissions.

**Working through the organising texts: a research design**

Lifelong learning research has not yet sufficiently problematised how women learners experience the organisation of social relations – in this case the assumptions, values and expectations of successful participation – yet it is
from such a perspective that questions can be asked that make visible an otherwise unrecognised set of problems (Smith 1987).

I used Smith’s notion of *organising texts* to develop a research approach that enabled me to step outside the conceptual framework that currently organises lifelong learning, and so uncover the embedded assumptions that construct exclusionary practices for potential learners.

My research focused on issues faced by mature-age women in Australia, returning to study. I interviewed twelve women students of a vocational education programme in South Australia to investigate what they had to say about learning; how they talked about their experiences of participation; and how they valued these experiences and contextualised them into their everyday lives. I applied a socially critical feminist theoretical approach to my study giving me a platform to place women’s stories at the starting point of the study and investigate women’s learning as both a gendered and contextualised experience.

Smith (1998) suggests that the researcher begin by ‘turning the established enterprise on its head’ (p45). By this she means that as researchers we begin from the perspective of the knower, that is, the person or people we are researching. In relation to lifelong learning research this notion calls for a focus on how participants construct their own meanings, rather than assuming particular meanings written by *organising texts*, and around which such texts are written.

Like Biesta and Tedder (2008) I understand that adult learning is bound up in life experiences; like these authors I also took a narrative approach to my research, although I retained the use of ‘stories’ to describe my data. I chose a form of narrative inquiry (Riessman c1993) that focused on stories of learning, and a fuller description of this narrative approach can be found in an earlier published article (Daniels 2008b). I used large ‘chunks’ from the interview transcripts as the major data source for my study. These data were analysed using a framework that recognised the contextual nature of experiences, and therefore enabled themes of learning to be developed *in relation* to women’s everyday experiences, not *despite* them.

I first needed to identify how, and by whom, mature women and their needs were currently being interpreted through the *organising texts* of lifelong learning. I found a methodological tool in Bacchi’s (1999) critique of policy construction, in which she asserts:

> [C]onstructions can be challenged. If we accept that our world is socially constructed, then it can be changed by challenging – deconstructing – constructions which have effects we wish to reduce or eliminate (p62)

A set of questions shapes Bacchi’s approach:
What is the problem represented to be?
What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation?
What effects are produced? Who is likely to benefit?
What is left unproblematic?
How would responses differ if the problem were thought about or represented differently?

These questions shift the focus from the identified to the identifier, illustrating how lifelong learning’s organising texts construct problems; and the limitations of its discursive framing become visible. It then becomes possible to step outside that existing discursive framework, and to acknowledge responses from those who would indeed represent their concerns differently, were they given the words and the conceptual space.

Using Smith’s notion and aided by Bacchi’s critique, I explored women’s stories of learning, and uncovered issues of their everyday that, although unacknowledged in lifelong learning’s organising texts, impacted on, and were very much part of, their learning experiences.

**Really useful research, really useful learning**

Findings from the interviews with the mature women in this study revealed stories of learning as an individual and social activity that is part of the context of everyday life. With women’s everyday excluded from the organising texts of lifelong learning, it becomes apparent why women, as a group, face exclusionary practices in their educational participation. Each of the women in my research, for example, spoke about their children in the context of their own learning; health, relationships and voluntary work as well as other forms of social participation were also woven into their talk of formal learning.

Although these women had accrued a wealth of knowledge and skills from their homebased work, they struggled with a lack of authority invested in those experiences. Avril, who found herself separated after bringing up a family, spoke of her need to ‘begin work,’ despite her years of experience as a mother and partner. She was:

> Going to be divorced, and not having worked since nineteen eighty-one. Having to, em, get myself some sort of employment, with a qualification of some description (Avril, interview 1).

The discursive orientation of an educational system that emphasises the value – and perhaps the promise – of (paid) work can leave the world of women such as Avril not only incomplete, but irrelevant: she is unable to identify the usefulness of her homebased skills. To participate in the system, Avril must organise her talk to fit the conceptual space of lifelong learning (in which paid employment and formal qualifications are assumed to be the measure of a person’s value) thus being drawn back into the very language-use that locates her as ‘other’ (Smith 1987). Despite being coerced into that
space, her unrecognised experiences ensure her continued exclusion, since, as Jackson (2005) notes ‘(t)he socially excluded are those who are not defined as economically active’ (p3).

Here, lack of paid employment is the representation of the problem. By asking (as Bacchi would) what is left unproblematic in the representation, and how this problem could be understood differently, it can then be understood that this framing of the problem ignores much of what constitutes women’s everyday lives, and how those women understand their everyday lives to be connected to their experiences as learners.

Application of solutions identified through such frameworks can, in addition, actually produce difficulties. Rosalie spoke of her reasons for not returning to study, offering a perspective that illustrates how perceived barriers to participation, when constructed for women, can actually compound issues of participation:

… a nine o’clock start, I would have struggled to get there. Or a quarter to nine start or an eight-thirty start. You know, you got to … and then I’d go “ah, look, forget it. You know? It’s too hard. I need, I need to prioritise my daughter. I can’t be putting her into Before School Care. I can’t afford it, or I can’t afford the, the emotional energy that that’s, or energy and pressure that that puts on her, and on me. It’s not fair”. I didn’t want to do that, you know, I decided to parent, so, obviously, I just can’t study (Rosalie, interview 1)

Whilst there is clearly an issue regarding childcare, Rosalie expresses her frustration at the way in which she is required to organise her life and that of her child to fit a construction of participation that takes little account of the realities of sole mothering. That, for Rosalie, is the problem.

The notion of educational barriers creates ‘a deficit model of the individual’ (Haggis 2006 p526). Haggis (2006) suggests the idea of barriers be reconceptualised as having been constructed from particular value systems. In doing so, she adopt a similar approach to Bacchi (1999), shifting the focus of the problem from the identified to the identifier: Who is calling these conditions barriers? What are the assumptions that underlie the representation of women’s everyday activities as problems to be overcome? What conditions, actions, feelings and values go unrecognised in this representation? And how are the features and assumptions evaluated, that represent this as a problem?

A more disturbing aspect of lifelong learning’s organising texts is the assumption that people do, and can, follow seamless and continuous pathways throughout life (European Commission 2006). It is claimed that access to and movement through and between education sites is available to everyone. Yet the pathways that women take through life often do not include
a continuous engagement with formal education since many women spend substantial amounts of time engaged in other activities. Such a mismatch in educational pathways leads to women’s different experiences being misunderstood; non-continuous engagement in formal education categorises women as a ‘deficit’ group. Contesting the claims made in lifelong learning texts, however, Blackmore (2006) notes that the seamless pathways are confined to a policy framework within which lifelong learning is focussed on: skill-based training rather than personal development or citizenship formation, on employability skills, not generic skills, on compliance to standards and not critical and independent thought (p13).

Identifying the role of *organising texts* in defining and normalising what is acceptable experience, Blackmore suggests that the focus of this literature is not about making choices but discouraging participants from questioning what they are learning, and why.

When words and experience are made visible and speak-able, however, participants’ stories are able to counter the meanings constructed within the *organising texts*, and the results can be significant. The methodology used in this research produced findings that identified omissions and offered alternatives: the participants’ stories not only countered the dominant texts, but analysis of the women’s stories also led to alternative constructions of learning. Using Johnson’s (1979) notion of ‘really useful’ I was able to identify a framework for Really Useful Learning that addressed the contextual, everyday nature of skills acquisition and application.

**Conclusion**
In revisiting an educational problematic such as the one this paper describes - educational exclusion - there is always the risk that we go over familiar territory; we recognise the same issues, follow familiar methodological steps, and consequently reveal the same findings. By travelling this familiar path we also reinscribe the existing omissions.

This paper has described a research approach that overcomes the limitations of current research in identifying the practices of exclusion embedded in the *organising texts* of lifelong learning. This approach has been shown to be useful for interrogating, from a critical perspective, the structure and limitations of organisational systems such as that of lifelong learning. Issues can be investigated through a different research lens, developing previously unrecognised perspectives on exclusion and - particularly significant – identifying the role that *organising texts* play in continuing exclusion.

The examples of mature women’s experiences illustrate how some groups of lifelong learners continue to face exclusion through the application of assumptions that drive the discursive practices of lifelong learning. Exploration of the learners’ experiences from the starting point of those
learners offers a methodological solution to the restrictions of lifelong learning’s discursive framework. Using a feminist critical approach, and Smith’s notion of *organising texts*, the tools, methods and analysis combine to create a discursive space in which hitherto unacknowledged experiences and silenced voices can be heard. These voices – telling stories of learning – challenge existing understandings of inclusive practices and offer learner perspectives not described in dominant lifelong learning texts.

The application of theories described in this paper has been shown to be Really Useful: for learners, it offers possibilities for participation based on experiences, through the opportunity to construct frameworks for Really Useful Learning; for researchers and educators this research design and methodology can be used to broaden understandings of the limitations of *organising texts*, of what it means to participate in lifelong learning, and especially of those participants who still struggle for inclusion.

References


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