Governing elderly care workers: A technology of activation and technique of invitation

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Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Introduction
European and national policies on employment strategies and education position in-service training and workplace education as essential in creating an employable workforce that can contribute to the economic growth of a region or country (European Commission, 2001, Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). The worker is to be active in realising such aims. Policies are written in ideal terms and suggest that all will benefit from active contribution. They are part of a wider politics that aims to activate citizens (Dahlstedt, 2009). In this paper, we turn our attention to the micro-politics of this activation within a regime of practice of elderly-care work. We explore technologies, techniques and tactics constitutive of this regime and as means whereby the elderly-care worker may be activated. We draw on resources from the work of Michel Foucault to theorize this, through an analysis of the rhetorical tactics of language that are deployed by a manager of a Swedish elderly-care home as she engages in conversation with her workers. The analysis is one that explores this particular micro-context as illustrative of means for activation which may be deployed more widely.

A regime of practice and technology and techniques of activation
We draw for our exploration on a theorization inspired by Michel Foucault (2007) and post-Foucauldian writing such as that of Mitchell Dean (1999) and Nikolas Rose (1999). For this, ‘practice’ signifies something quite different from our everyday understanding of the word. Practice is bound up in a relationship between power, truth and identity. More specifically, a regime of practice is defined as the organized and routinized ways we do things (cf. Dean, 1999). An analysis of a regime of practice includes several aspects. It focuses on the elements that constitute the regime of practice and processes by which these are brought together, the specific knowledge made possible through this regime and necessary for it to emerge, the techniques through which the regime operates and reaches its goals (cf. Dean, 1999). It is the last of these foci that we emphasise in the ensuing analysis by focusing on the technology of activation, and its associated techniques and tactics.

Technologies do not have essence, nor are they the outcome of a specific will or intention to govern (Fejes & Nicoll, 2008), rather they are assemblages of elements, such as aspirations, beliefs, knowledge and practices of calculation, that come together tactically and aspire to shape specific subjectivities (Rose, 1999). The technology of confession is one such assemblage that has become central to the exercise of power across the Western world, in part through processes of learning. A
technology of confession is one of activation, it operates through very specific techniques that target the subject and channel power through it. For example, the educational support and guidance interview draws on a technique of invitation within a wider confessionist technology (Fejes & Nicoll, 2008). Here the learner becomes both object of knowledge (visible for calculation) and is made subject, through a process whereby the learner comes to know and act on him or herself as a particular kind of learner. Technologies depend upon such specific techniques in the shaping of subjectivities. It is such technology and techniques that we can explore as mechanisms of worker activation in elderly care.

We illustrate how the manager at the home mobilises techniques that invite employees to activate themselves and be responsible for this. There are tactics of language involved in this. We focus then on techniques and tactics as they operate through the rhetorical moves of conversation, as the exercise of power is worked out productively in and through language. Rhetorical tactics are amenable to analysis in that may be relatively stable within language and available for description (Potter, in Nicoll 2008). They show how language acts to make the constitution of active subjects more possible or even likely.

Empirical material
The empirical research drawn on in this paper is drawn from a wider research project at six nursing homes for elderly people. Initial access to nursing homes was granted through research that was concerned with an in-service training programme in elderly care that these homes were involved in. This study encompassed interviews with 30 people who had different roles within the training programme and worked at six different elderly care homes. The aim of the training programme was to support health care assistants (HCAs) in recognising their prior learning (RPL) during work hours. This RPL activity was complemented with educational activities. The programme awarded a certificate equal to the one at upper secondary school level. Thus workers completing the programme would be able to be employed as licensed practical nurses (LPNs) instead of HCAs. The focus of the research project was the relations between experience, learning and recognition of this, and the effects of the programme as they were experienced by workers (see Fejes & Andersson, 2009). This project also included questions about what workers felt about what it means to be a health care worker, and explored how they were being positioned and positioned themselves as subjectivities through the training programme (cf. Fejes & Nicoll, forthcoming). In this paper, complementing interviews with field observations and follow up interviews allowed for further more detailed explication of how subjectivity is being shaped at the workplace through the techniques drawn upon by the manager within a wider technology of activation.

A technology of activation during staff meetings
In this section we illustrate one setting where the technology of activation is mobilised. Here, Donna, the manager of the elderly-care home, mobilises a technique of invitation in relation to staff meetings. Every fourth week she holds a staff meeting with each of the three work groups. During these meetings, carers are invited to raise issues. Between meetings the group of workers list issues on a board in their office. This is then compiled into an agenda for each meeting. During the meeting, the carers’ issues are first on the agenda and the manager adds her items last. One of the carers chairs the meeting and another writes the minutes/takes
notes. The framing of the meeting itself draws on a technique of invitation and the cultivation of responsibility. By asking the employees to define the agenda and having one of them chair the meeting they are invited to be active and responsible in defining the issues at stake. They are employees whom the manager trusts to raise important problems and take responsibility for this. Mobilisation of a technique of invitation is clearly illustrated during these meetings. In the following field note the manager position herself as one who asks questions and asks the carers to define problems and solutions:

A few minutes into one of the meetings with work group B, Donna asks what items the work group wants to add to the agenda.

*Work group member:* ‘Our work schedule, how we are supposed to have time to do all the tasks. We are afraid to get back the stress we previously had. Now it has been good, but how will it be?’

*Donna* acknowledges their worries and promise to make a follow up of the new work schedule.

*Work group member:* ‘We don’t have time to do what we should as contact persons for some of the residents’.

*Donna:* ‘How do you define your role as contact persons?’

*Work group member:* ‘To take them for walks. We also do a lot of shopping for them.’

*Donna:* ‘Twelve if I’m not mistaken.’ She asks them if it is possible to coordinate the shopping.

*Work group member:* ‘Yes, we do. But you can’t shop for five to six people at the same time’.

*Donna:* ‘Is five too much?’

*Work group member:* ‘Yes, three is enough if you are by yourself.’

*Donna:* ‘Is it possible to do the shopping in another way than you usually do?’

*Work group member:* ‘Shop for all at the same time’

*Donna:* ‘Have you looked at how other nursing homes do it? Not everyone is as close to a shop as we are.’

*Work group member:* ‘In home care they have a car.’

*Donna:* ‘Maybe it’s possible to borrow their car sometimes?’

The discussion continues and at the end Donna summarises the problem and reflects about how it might be solved. As an observer, I felt that Donna was trying to get the care workers to reflect about solutions to the problem they raised. She agrees both with their definition of problems and solutions. (Field note Observation 3)

Three specific rhetorical tactics are important to note, as they have specific micro-effects. They are tactics in the exercise of power. The workers initially identify the work schedule as a problem – they have too much to do within the time available. This is a rhetorical move of *externalization*, which is a common device that acts to construct the problem as a ‘fact’, but in a particular way. It puts the responsibility for the problem outside the agency of the workers accounting for it (Potter, 1996). The problem is identified as belonging to something external to the workers, and beyond their agency. Donna implicitly accepts externalization as the problem of the work schedule through her initial promise to look into it herself. However, she quickly
steers the conversation so that the problem becomes externalized in relation to herself and at the same time internalized as a problem of the worker. This is a defensive tactic, which turns worker attention onto themselves and their work organization as the problem to be solved.

Her invitation affords the workers with the category entitlement (Potter 1996) to have knowledge of this problem and find solutions. This tactic builds a category entitlement to speak and this requires both knowledge and responsibility for it. She steers the conversation, so that what unfolds is then a worker self-analysis of role and job tasks and interrogation of effective action in relation to one of the job tasks. This constitutes knowledge of both role and job tasks, and effective action – the solution to the problem. The onus of responsibility for lack of time is therefore placed on the worker as it is internalized through this direction of conversation. At the same time the role of the worker as ‘contact person’ is being worked up, constituted as ‘factual’, ‘real’ and as able to be categorized in this way.

Categorization and internalization are rhetorical tactics that both work to constitute the reality of the ‘contact person’ as it is described here, but only in so far as it is understood and treated as such in the practice of this interaction. ‘Formulating as something brings the things into being only in so far as it is understood or treated as such in a particular interaction’ (Potter, 1996,177 italics original). However, where this kind of invitation is repeated it is reinforced and these workers may come to view themselves in this way. The category ‘contact person’ is devoid of qualitative content – the person is a ‘contact’, rather than a ‘friend’, ‘carer’, ‘companion’, and so forth – and this may help keep the workers’ subsequent descriptions of their work, free of qualitative detail. If, by contrast, the worker be called ‘carer’ then the question would logically follow as to what to care means in this context. How people are categorized is in itself a powerful rhetorical tactic.

The effect of the tactic that turns the worker’s externalized description of the problem into one internalized as that of the workers, is powerful. Discussion of the manager’s responsibility is avoided and at the same time the problem is reframed as one internal to the worker whereby their categorization as such brings forth knowledge of worker role and tasks, and a self-responsibility for problems and solutions. This is work in the construction of the activity and future potential agency of the workers. We can see this when we look at the tactics commonly drawn upon in empiricist descriptions to place the agency within the facts that are being externalized. This is a common feature of the empiricist rhetorical repertoire, which allows attribution of ‘the data’ with agency: ‘the results show’, ‘the data support’ and so on (Potter 1996: 157). Here the reverse is happening, the workers want to attribute the work schedule with agency but the manager reverses this move and attributes the agency to the workers.

A similar example can be seen in the following field note from a meeting in work group A. However, this identifies a problem that has a more qualitative ‘feel’ in its implication that the one task of the worker within the home is to consider the quality of social interaction of residents. This is a problem over poor interaction between three of the ‘residents’.
A discussion about a conflict between three residents emerges. These three are often nagging each other, or excluding one another from their social interactions. ‘How can we solve this, can we help those who feel excluded’, Donna asks? In connection to this, and as part of the solution, another discussion emerges about how to refurbish the common room by changing dining tables between to floors. ‘What do you think, should we suggest a change? What do you think the residents would say? Who will argue against this? Is there an argument we can use for changing the tables? We all need to have the same story’ Donna says. (Field note Observation 10)

Once again, we can see how the care workers are invited by the manager to refine a problem and propose a solution. They are again afforded category entitlement to do so through this invitation. Care workers take up this invitation in their ensuing conversation. There are various details that are rhetorically interesting in this field description. Donna constitutes herself as a member of the group through her use of ‘we’, even although she continues to steer the conversation through questioning, and through this helps constitute that group. Through this, she leads the workers to construct a narrative for change that is rhetorically organized to be convincing to the residents. A narrative that has been constructed by thinking through the potential support and opposition that it may receive prior to its deployment is much more likely to be convincing to an audience than one that has not had this treatment. The narrative is, a priori, constructed as to persuade the audience to support it. This is quite a sophisticated practice in the constitution of ‘reality’. It requires the workers to build together an argument, considered for its ‘reasonableness’ to the residents, where future potential undermining by them has already been anticipated and the argument protected from this possibility, in part in that it is a narrative shared within the group of workers (Potter, in Nicoll 1998). Implicit in this is a highly developed capacity for group rhetorical work. The aim is not to tell the residents that they are not to exclude each other, but to get worker agreement over a ‘story’, through which resident agreement to a change in the layout of the tables is quite likely. Reality here corresponds with the most useful argument in constituting agreement. Here it is the clients who are to be invited to agree and this builds up their own category entitlement.

Discussion
We have illustrated in this paper an analysis of a technique of invitation drawn on during a staff meeting and in a space of work by a manager of care workers. This is part of a wider regime of practice governing care workers in elderly-care in Sweden. It contributes to a regime of practice aimed at shaping and fostering the care worker in these homes. It is a practice that through alternative analysis might be categorized as ‘informal teaching’ inviting ‘informal learning’. It is through a this kind of limited form of activation in the elderly-care home that workers are afforded by their manager category entitlement to particular roles, responsibilities and are invited to develop their knowledge and skills, and problems and their solutions, as a specific form of active worker. They afford category entitlement to those cared for and inscribe particular relations between them, with the guidance of their manager. This is a limited form of activation in that as it makes them
In asking how these practices of activation come into being and be institutionalized we can turn to Dean (1999) who argues that practices, structures and values of the market are ‘folded back’ into areas that were previously public provisions, so as to reconfigure them as quasi-markets. The elderly-care homes in Sweden are currently undergoing this kind of reconfiguration. This is not only a measure aimed at efficiency but is a mechanism for the reformation of conduct towards that of enterprise and the consumer. Structures and values of the market become drawn on in previously public services and a regime of practice governing private sector institutions is extended out into the public sphere. Neo-liberalism no longer conceives of the government of society, as it no longer makes a division between the state and society. Here any transformation requires for Dean (1999) the invention of new forms of advanced liberal government and government of the social.

There is a question about the contemporary relation of informal and in-service training and education to this regime and of the limits of work that these forms of training and education then does and can do. Neo-liberalism merely requires knowledge of the means by which the capacities of these diverse groups might be made operable and a regime of practice to mobilize them. This limits informal and in-service training and education to the kind of techniques and technologies of activation that we have seen here. These are driven by technologies of activation from below and managed through those of performance from above.

Dean (1999, 174) work is suggestive of a possible redirection for educators and researchers, which emerges through engagement with the development of what he identifies as ‘community’. Such development, he argues, creates a space for dialogue with diverse groups and movements, including the needs defined by consumers and users of previously public expertise and services. Such a trajectory could be directed to the development of practices, rationalities, ethics and moralities that reconfigure the social as they re-make it (Dean, 1999). In the context of the elderly-care home, educators and researchers might then engage with community groups and movements and enter into dialogue with the elderly people and their families about their needs. This could allow diverse and previously subjugated knowledges to find some expression. This would appear a possibility and potentially useful avenue for further exploration in the repositioning of research and educational work.

An analysis of advanced liberal government alongside the kind of analysis that we have carried out here, then begins to problematise our own role as critics and researchers. Here we find that with the closing down of a social space in advanced liberal regimes the forms of criticism and social promotion previously offered by educators and researchers and required through liberalism are no longer necessary. Neo-liberalism merely requires knowledge of the means by which the capacities of these diverse groups might be made operable. Where these are formally regulated, through technologies of performance, and the kinds of technologies of activation that we have seen here in the elderly-care home, the possibilities for reinvention appear slim. However, the possibility of transformation through alternative forms of government within advanced liberal government and new forms of government of the social (Dean 1999), suggest that our work is unlikely to end. Research might work to identify alternative forms of activation and knowledge of their effects. Although this is
perhaps to suggest a repoliticisation of research and although this might also be
dangerous its possibility might provide an opening for further theorization.

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This document was added to the Education-line collection on 25 June 2010