Michel Foucault and the world of discourse

In this article, I want to look at important the idea of *discourse*, one of the key concepts developed by the French theorist Michel Foucault (1926-1984). I apply the concept to the analysis of education policies. You may feel that you have more than enough sociological theories to deal with as it is. A-level text books only devote a few pages to Foucault's work, so you may be tempted not to bother. However, this article aims to convince you that there are several good reasons for finding out a bit more about Foucault.

For a start, if you plan to go on to study almost any subject in the arts and humanities or the social sciences at university, you are very likely to hear Foucault's name mentioned in lectures or find references to his work on your reading lists. So, it is not a bad idea to dip your toe into the water and get a head start on this topic.

Secondly, as Foucault takes a very critical approach to the theories of society you will have learnt about, he gives you a way to evaluate the modernist theorists sociologists usually discuss. As all A-level sociology students know, evaluating theories and concepts will get you a higher mark. Even if you reject Foucault's concepts, learning about them and using them critically will enable you to make your own arguments stronger.

Putting Foucault's work in context

The best way to introduce any thinker is to point out where they came from and when they were working. At the peak of his career, Foucault was Professor of The History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France in Paris and his academic

interests and background were in philosophy and the history of philosophy. This explains why some of Foucault's concepts can seem very abstract; he was not a sociologist.

The second point to mention is that Foucault was working at a time when there was considerable disagreement about the validity of Marxism. You may feel, just on the basis of these two details, that Foucault seems to have potential to become very complicated, very quickly. You could be right to feel that way; Foucault can be a challenge to understand. However, this brief sketch also indicates that one simple way to look at Foucault is to see him simply as a critic of Marxism.

Foucault's main beef with Marxism is that it was too crude. Foucault did not like the way that, as he saw it, Marxism always boiled down (or reduced) complex social relationships and saw them as the result of simple economic causes. Where Marx saw the world in terms of economic concepts, Foucault preferred to look at the role of ideas and systems of knowledge - or what he called 'discourse'.

What is discourse?

So, what exactly is discourse and why did Foucault think it was so important? In ordinary English, discourse is just a noun that refers to communication in speech or in writing. To use it in this way is now perhaps rather unusual and formal: it is very high level or 'posh' language.

It might help here to think back to Basil Bernstein's elaborated code; to refer to a 'discourse' is to use an elaborated code. Unfortunately explaining discourse also gets a bit more complicated because Foucault wants 'discourse' to mean something a bit different from the more common language meanings.

For Foucault, discourse is not just language; it is rather the power and knowledge that is expressed in and through language. So, for Foucault, to talk about

discourses is to talk about the different sets of knowledge and the ways of thinking that can be observed in a society. The concept, as Foucault uses it, goes even further than this: knowledge also has an impact on our social practices – the ways we act and behave.

This means Foucault is using 'discourse' in a very particular way. When sociologists and theorists invent or find difficult words and give them particular meanings, part of our job, as students and teachers, is to investigate critically what they are doing.

Foucault's view was that any society will contain lots of different discourses and it is the job of researchers to identify and study them. However, he put particular emphasis on the point that some of the most important discourses in modern societies are in the 'human sciences', a term which includes sciences such as biology, but also the social sciences.

So, if the idea of 'knowledge' seems a bit abstract, we can simplify it and say that Foucault is really just referring to what we would call today 'subjects' or 'disciplines': such as science, medicine, law, or sociology; and of course, these subjects all develop their own jargon or language.

Applying discourse to education

We can see how this idea about discourse works in practice by applying it to the topic of education and education policies. Foucault's approach suggests that we will find different ways of speaking and thinking about education and different educational practices whenever there are different discourses.

To understand the discourses of the present, Foucault argues that we have to see how they have developed through history. For example, in general terms, we can see a shift in the discourse of education from medieval times (before the 14th

century) to the so-called 'Renaissance' (from 14th-16th century). In the medieval period, education was based around a very abstract style of religious and philosophical knowledge, known as 'medieval scholasticism'.

From the time of the Renaissance, however, the discourse of education gradually shifted to a focus on what were seen to be more relevant human needs and values. Over this broad period, the discourse – what counted as knowledge - changed. As this happened, so social practices changed and so, too, the educational curriculum and the way in which it was taught.

Modern discourses about education

Foucault argues that sometime around the 18th century, the discourse changed again and authoritative forms of knowledge became dominated by the idea of science and the goal of developing scientific laws. This shift also saw people starting to apply science and scientific methods to government. In fact, government came to be seen as a way of devising the best and most scientific way to ensure the efficient management of populations.

This is very different to a Marxist approach. Foucault was not particularly interested in class and did not really believe that there is such a thing as a 'class struggle.' Neither did he believe that the state is the most important institution in society. From Foucault's perspective, the rise of compulsory state education in industrial societies in the 19th century is not best seen as – as Marxists see it - as a project undertaken by the capitalist class to ensure the reproduction of labour power and to keep the working class in their place.

In contrast, Foucault's theory suggests that compulsory state education was the result of a changed discourse: and let us remember, that means changes in the systems of thought and the practices that go with this change. In this process,

many different groups of experts and expert knowledge were involved, and Foucault pointed out that many of these groups developed outside of state institutions.

The development of state education for example, was a process influenced by educationalists, psychologists and economists. Foucault argued that such people were not capitalists. They were 'middle class', but for Foucault this does not mean that they acted on the basis of some 'common interest', either to subjugate the working class, or to promote the economic interests of capitalists. Rather, their 'interests' – or those of at least some of them - were in pursuing the promotion of their own expert knowledge.

Two discourses of education: 1944 and Neo-Liberalism

Foucauldians (the name for those using Foucault's concepts) could apply the concept of discourse and this general approach to the educational policies you have studied at A-level. For example, the 1944 Education Act and the tripartite system created three types of school - grammar, technical and secondary for three supposedly different types of student ('academic', 'technical' and 'practical'). A Foucauldian would point out that this was a scheme based upon the 'expert knowledge' of educational psychologists, such as Cyril Burt, whose work on intelligence lead to the development of the '11 plus' test.

Another example of education policy explained in Foucauldian terms could be the neo-liberal policies pursued since the late 1980s. Contemporary Marxists, such as Rikowski, claim that these policies are the result of economic globalization and the increasingly intense competition between rival capitalist nation-states. Foucauldians offer a different view: in the UK, politicians from right across the political spectrum (Conservative and Labour governments) have adopted the discourse of management theory and economics experts and applied it to

education policy. In this task, politicians have been helped by the work of educationalists, 'school improvement' experts, educational administrators (civil servants and Ofsted inspectors), and Headteachers and senior teachers.

A Foucauldian approach would therefore argue that neo-liberal education policies are not the result of the co-ordinated action of a capitalist class. A Foucauldian approach would challenge the Marxist view which assumes, firstly, that capitalists control the state and secondly, that all capitalists have the same views about education policy.

These examples also show us that discourses have an impact on social practices. The 1944 Education Act led to the practice of the 11-plus exam and the creation of separate schools for different types of student. Neo-liberal education discourse, with its focus on efficiency, excellence and quality, has coached a population into the practices of measuring exam results, school performance, and making league tables.

Discourses are, therefore, very powerful methods of disciplining people. Foucauldians would say that discourses are performative; that is, they make us perform or act in a certain way. The next time you check a school or university ranking in a 'league table', you too are acting in a performative way. You have learnt (from the established discourse) that there is a 'truth' about 'good' and 'bad' educational institutions, and that you can find this 'truth' in the statistics created by experts.

Concluding points

For Foucault, then, the power of expert discourse is the most characteristic and pervasive feature of modern societies:

"The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements." (Foucault, 1983)

This observation distinguishes Foucault's approach from Marxist and Functionalist theory and provides an alternative view of knowledge. Foucault would consider both of these to be positivist theories. In his view, the development of the human and social sciences does not reveal the laws governing social processes leading us towards greater freedom; rather, it leads to knowledge being used to control people.

However, while Foucault's theories offer a fresh and challenging approach, they are not immune to criticism. Three brief points can be made here:

- Foucault may have underestimated the importance of the state: experts may create knowledge but, ultimately, it is the state which makes the rules about education.

- It is unclear from his work whether some discourses are more powerful than others and if so, why.

- Foucault claims that discourses shape all our thought and behaviour - it is impossible to think 'outside' discourse. Yet he is claiming to be able to see through discourse to the truth. This seems contradictory.

For sure, Foucault presents a fresh perspective and a contrast to Marxist and other approaches. However, we should remember that we do not necessarily have to choose between Foucault and Marx. In real life, researchers often adapt and use concepts from different theories, and it can be difficult to categorize some researchers into easily identifiable theoretical schools.

Theories simply give us conceptual tools to think about society and societal relations. Discourse is perhaps, although not without problems, a particularly interesting and useful tool.

References

Foucault, M. (1983) *Discipline and Punish*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Rikowski