E-learning: as policy, as practice

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Introduction

This conference paper focuses on the divergence between policy discourses of the British government on e-learning, and the experiences of a group of mature learners participating in an English part-time doctoral programme which has elements of online support. The origins of the paper are my reactions when reading last year an online consultation document on e-learning by the UK government, proposing a 'unified e-learning strategy' (DfES, 2003-2004). Its claims for e-learning seemed to contrast with student experiences that I was hearing of through interviews conducted as part of our own EU-funded project on internet based assessment. I decided to explore the use of critical discourse analysis (or CDA) to investigate the two discourses, so the paper presents some of the findings of that analysis.

The policy document in question is an online consultation first published in July 2003 entitled 'Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy', of which the Executive Summary declares *'We need an e-learning strategy that touches the lives of every single learner. [..] The time has come to recognise the benefits that these technologies can bring to the way we teach and learn'* (DfES, 2003-4). This analysis is contrasted with that of excerpts from transcript data from interviews conducted with the students in the programme described above where they discuss their use of the online environment and the impact the internet has had on their lives. The differences in the two discourses highlight tensions between the claims made about the benefits of e-learning (which are used as part of the rationale for its further development) and the impact of the technology in the shaping of the workplaces and personal space of these students. It also raises questions about the role of such online consultations in democratic processes, and the extent to which these processes legitimise policy makers' actions rather than allowing more radical participatory engagement.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The analysis uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as described by Fairclough, (2003). CDA is located within critical social science and sees discourse as a central element of social practices sitting in a dialectical relationship with their other elements, so that discourse both shapes but is also shaped by these social practices. It draws on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994), an approach which pays particular attention to the situated and indexical nature of meaning. Its analysis oscillates between different levels of granularity, unlike other forms of discourse analysis which might focus exclusively on fine-grained linguistic details without situating these within wider social practices, or alternatively focus on broader higher-level concepts but pay little attention to how a text's discursive work might be accomplished in language use.

So, for example, at a detailed linguistic level the text's semantic and grammatical relations are examined, as are speech functions, grammatical tenses, voice and mood. The analyst attempts to identify the discourses and styles of the text, taking account also of the particular social events that are selected for representation. This draws on the concept of genre, or 'a way of acting in its discourse aspect' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 216), examples being different forms of interview, or of academic writing. At a broader level, it also includes a consideration of the social events in which the texts play a part, the network of practices and genre chains in which it is embedded. Such a network, involving sets of genres, discourses and styles, is seen as 'order of discourse', or 'a network of social practices in its linguistic aspect' (Fairclough, 2003, p 24), where certain patterns of language use will be recognised as legitimate by social actors involved in these social practices, while others will be excluded. An important aspect of an order of discourse is its orientation to difference, involving the extent to which different voices (or texts) are heard. This draws on Bakhtinian notions of genre, intertextuality and dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981), as well as the ideas of Foucault, where knowledge, power and truth are enmeshed, as described in his concept of a 'regime of truth';

> *''Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.*
>
> *'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth.'*
>
> *(Foucault, 1980, p.133)*

The analysis moves then between detailed linguistic focus and interpretation of the broader order of discourse, where these '*ordered procedures*' might be identified within the social practices at work in particular settings. In its focus on discourse and language as way of studying the social, CDA also has especial relevance when economies are characterised as 'knowledge economies', a characterisation in which discourse plays a central part, with performative power in producing and circulating new knowledges,

effectively calling into being realities it purports to describe (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001).

Although recognising the role of discourse in producing knowledge and the power relations that are inherent within this, CDA resists a radical Foucauldian position where the subject is constructed through discourse, and where the social is reduced to discourse. Instead, while recognising that discourse to some extent internalises all other aspects of social practices, these are described as having both material and symbolic aspects shaped by an ongoing dialectic between forces of constraint and transformation, allowing a role to be found for critical social science to 'subvert the practices it analyses'(Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 33). In adopting a critical stance, it rejects a view of analysis as being value neutral, and see as a result of this that it is important for practitioners to 'reflect on the social location of their theoretical practice' (1999, p. 29), an issue they feel applies to all social and language research however, not only to discourse analysis. So I must bear in mind that the accounts I construct here are inevitably a reflection of my own understandings and particular interests. As Tonkiss (1998, p. 260) points out, this creates the need for some modesty in the claims derived from the analyses; however this does not undermine the importance of a space for the expression of divergent views.

E-Learning as Policy: Analysis of E-Learning Strategy Texts

Within a conference paper the complete representation of texts for analysis and the analyses themselves would not be possible, so the analyses are summarized here.
The e-consultation text is a part of a complex network of social practices, here a chain of consultation events initiated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) of the UK government as part of its policy-making process. These consultations took place online and also face-to-face in public meetings relating directly or indirectly to the discussion of government strategy, so involves a great chain of different text genres, written and spoken, online and face-to-face. The online consultation was launched in July 2003 and closed at the end of January 2004, during which it was 'live' and open for comment via the 'Consultations' page of the DfES website. Summary reports on the consultation events (DfES, 2004a) and on the online responses are available online, the latter containing a message from the Secretary of State for Education which opens '*My department will now be using the consultation responses to drive forward our strategy for using technology to personalise education'* (DfES, 2004b). The final report is announced for the autumn of this year, so at this point must be imminent, and should normally include an indication of the way the consultation responses affected policy development[1].

[1]This can be accessed at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/elearningstrategy/. The link on this page to the consultation document also provides updates about its progress. Although spanning all sectors of education and workplace learning, the online consultation itself obtained only 430 responses.

As part of a network of social practices then, the consultation is embedded in the generation of important policy initiatives. Although this consultation is over, e-learning has its own web presence on the DfES site (www.dfes.gov.uk/elearningstrategy), which incorporates photographic images of children and senior citizens engaged at computer terminals or other information technology devices (Figure 1). Here we find that '*The overriding objective of the e-learning Strategy Unit is to encourage a constructive national debate on how e-learning can contribute to the future role of education, involving all key stakeholder groups*'.

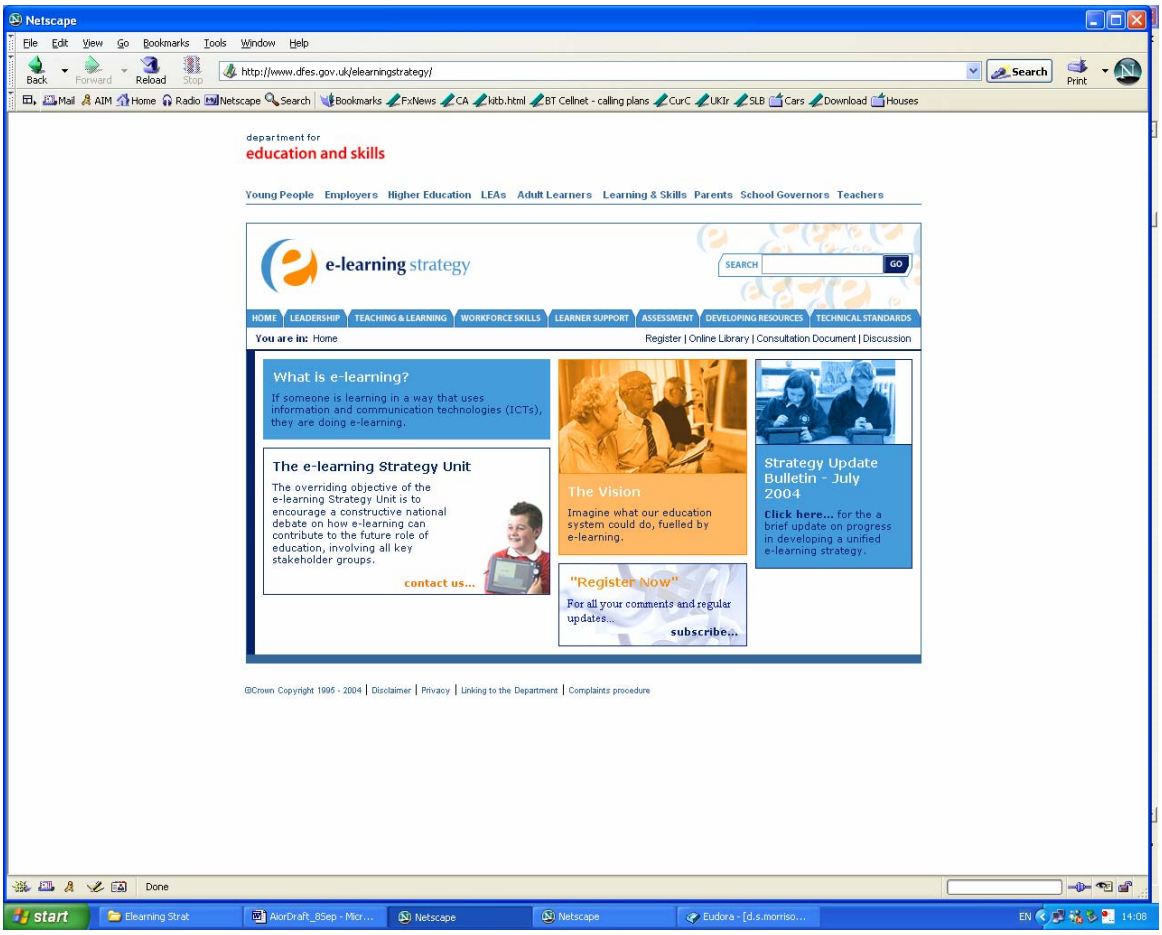

Figure 1: Department of Education and Skills E-Learning Strategy Home Page, accessed 18 September, 2004

While certain features on this page are conversational in tone (e.g. *contact us*...), the links lead to a wide variety of text genres. Fairclough (2003, p.77) notes how the web can combine different genres, disembedding them and representing them for different audiences and purposes over time. So links from this page lead to a vast array of reports, presentation material, legalistic documents, as well as to the consultation document itself and its accompanying questionnaire. The evolution of the consultation process has

resulted in a chain of recontextualised representations, where for example the face-to-face meetings and their texts are represented in a summary document, and then further contributed to the different progress updates on the strategy which were posted on the site. This aspect is discussed further below. In its combination of visual imagery and text, websites are multimodal, and the visual imagery on this page seems designed to encourage an association of e-learning with now familiar discourses of lifelong learning, encompassing the young and old, involving intertextual relations which span different semiotic modes. It includes an invitation to the reader to participate (*contact us...)* which in an earlier version of the site appeared as *How you can get involved*. Both are conversational in tone and so serve to suggest a reduction in the distance between government and the reader. The page both informs citizens about the e-learning strategy as well as inviting their participation; however it is also a persuasive text which seems to have an 'advocating' message. In many ways this online text resembles promotional material; attention has been paid for example to the logo of the page, contributing to what Fairclough (2003, p. 115) calls the 'aestheticisation of everyday life', where events are designed and also represented with a promotional gloss. The site contributes to the mediation of the British government's educational policy by its citizens; in terms of interaction however, its representation is substantially controlled by policy-makers. With the exception of a discussion area within the site, they are otherwise able to shape and re-shape what is to be represented, and the specific ways this might be done.

Foreword Analysis

Turning now to the analysis of the Foreword to the e-learning strategy consultation (DfES, 2003-2004), this is written by the government minister responsible for education in England. As the opening of a consultation process, this might be expected to reflect a generous tolerance of difference, indeed to elicit and encourage this. However a striking element of the text is the way in which it brackets difference and instead discursively constructs consensus; it achieves this in several ways, one being its use of declarative statements throughout, with no modalization (where statements might be qualified or hedged by use of modal verbs *may* or *might* for example). The opening statement '*E-learning has the power to revolutionise the way we work and the way we learn'* is an example here, with the categorical assertiveness of the declarative mode enhanced by the single sentence paragraphing. The construction of consensus (rather than difference) is also evident in the conclusion of this introductory letter which explicitly (although rather contradictorily) redefines the 'consultation' as an exercise '*to be clear about what actions we all need to take, so we all work together to make e-learning at the heart of they way we all work*.' The use of the modal verb '*need*' again implies a positive evaluation coupled with a modal verb of obligation, but framed in such a way the consultation is limited to issues of *how* elearning is to be embedded within education; more fundamental questions are taken as given, including e-learning's assumed transformatory potential.

It is also notable that the representation of e-learning in first sentence attributes it agency (potential) to act upon the learner, the teacher, and on learning processes, although more reflection might lead one to think that the learner (with the support of the teacher), in conjunction with a multiplicity of diverse tools used for learning, might rather be where

agency should be co-located, or distributed. Fairclough (2003: 220) uses the term 'nominalisation' to describe the use of nouns that represent actors and processes in ways that obfuscate agency. Here however the effects go beyond obfuscation of agency, in attributing agency to e-learning itself. The use of the term and what this might involve is not unpacked however.

There is also an absence of explicitly attributed voices that might support the claims for e-learning, as well as an absence of voices that alternatively might dispute them. Where other groups are referred to, (*many players* expanded to *education providers, employers, local authorities and the e-learning industry*, as well as the government), they are constructed as having a duty to pursue the development of e-learning through the use of modal verbs of obligation. The texturing of the relationship between the author and the reader also contributes to this, achieved through use of the 1st person plural *we*. The voice of the reader is thus appropriated within the discourse of the writer. Indeed the phrase '*we all*', is repeated three times in the last sentence, and contributes to a discursive construction of communal commitment to e-learning development, where working together to shared ends is normalized and potential objections marginalized. The only hypotactic relations in the text are of purpose (e.g. '*so that learners can make a seamless transition as they progress'* and '*so we all work together to make e-learning at the heart of the way we all work'*). This kind of logical relation contributes both to the legitimizing of the text, and to an appearance of rationality.

Significant assumptions are also made within this text. Evaluative assumptions about e-learning are made throughout, from the opening to the concluding sentence (*E-learning has the potential to revolutionise the way we teach and how we learn'* and '*I believe the point of this consultation is to be clear about what actions we all need to take, so we all work together to make e-learning at the heart of they way we all work'.* The use of the word *revolutionise* in the first sentence within the context of the text implies a positive evaluation of this process as beneficial and progressive; this is reaffirmed in other parts of the text. Although the development of e-learning is represented as challenging, there is an overt and strong evaluative statement that this is '*rightly so',* so constructing this as a legitimate responsibility for educators to engage with. A further important evaluative assumption is made in the claim that ICT skills '*will help to boost productivity and competitiveness'.* The text addresses both workplace and educational sectors, and here prioritizes the economic benefits of education, effectively collapsing social and educational policy within the economic sphere in ways that have been seen as typical of many policy texts (Ball, 2001). Indeed the rationale for the development of e-learning is seen as routed in the needs of the knowledge economy, which therefore emerges as an important discourse in this text, but is always associated with '*potential'* and '*progress'*. Here an implicit 'problem solution' relation is constructed through the positive evaluation of the 'revolution' in teaching and learning posited in the first sentence and the phrase 'there is much more to do' in sentence 2, where there is an implied failure of educational and work-based learning to have met the demands of the knowledge economy, with the implied solution being tied to e-learning development.

Excerpts from Consultation Questionnaire Text

The Consultation Questionnaire text itself extends to over 60 pages, so fine-grained analysis of the entire text would be very laborious and some selectivity is needed. Where detailed linguistic analysis is used here, this will focus on Chapter 1 (*Why Is E-Learning Important?),* with some discussion of Chapter 8 *(Aligning Assessment).*

The different chapters of the document all conclude with a consultation question, eliciting the response of the reader to the document, so there is clearly a much greater openness to difference in the structure of the consultation document. On the other hand, the representation of the case for e-learning is as categorical as in the Foreword. For instance the opening paragraph uses verb tenses such as present simple and modals of possibility to construct e-learning as again having transformative powers: *'It has the potential to transform the way we teach and learn across the board*.' (p 9). It also again makes assumptions about the nature of e-learning, in for example the statement '*E-learning can even reach out and re-engage people who are currently not involved in education because it is interactive, and can adapt to their needs*.' However this could be contradicted by studies that seem to show that often e-learning is not used in interactive ways, but rather for information transmission or indeed for administrative purposes (Britain and Liber, 2004, Crook and Light, 2002). The chapter also appeals in a similar way as the foreword to discourses of the knowledge economy, constructing IT skills as a prerequisite in today's workforce.

The claims for e-learning are substantiated to some extent however, with the inclusion of short 'case studies', of approximately 150 words, illustrating ways that e-learning has benefited particular groups of learners. In this chapter, for example, two of these case studies are represented, both in adult learning contexts. Reference is also made to quantitative and qualitative data sources, and to research programmes undertaken by 'Government agencies and university research groups' which are to appear on the strategy website. So here there is certainly greater attribution for the claims that are made than in the Foreword, although not in very specific ways at this juncture.

On the other hand, no representation is made of alternative voices, which would point to e-learning as being less advantageous. Opposing views on a number of different levels could easily be found however. Crook and Light (2002) found that the use of networked computers for undergraduate study could be highly distracting for example, and lead to a disjointed learning experience, disrupting the practices of study of the students. The difficulties of developing teachers' IT skills are not represented in any detailed way (Galanouli et al, 2004), nor the complexity of IPR issues which have still to be resolved (Shepherd et al, 2003). Nor indeed is the lack of pedagogical rationale in some government funded e-learning projects: here Goodyear and Jones' (2003) investigations of the government-funded Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER) projects, at a cost of £30 million, found that few of the project teams could enunciate a rationale for their work which went beyond access, contradicting claims for e-learning which stress its interactive nature. Similarly the costs of developing online learning seem to be glossed over, including the crucial question of who might pay for the strategy development, this

despite evidence that suggests that e-learning costs can be onerous (Rumble, 2001). In other words, this seems to be a rather selective representation of the case for e-learning, which tends again to veer towards a promotional rather than tone.

It is also a document with a rather technical focus, proposing 'unified' technological responses to educational problems, despite the sociological issues that are clearly in play but which are little discussed. The section on assessment (Chapter 8: Aligning Assessment) is one illustration of this. Contrary discourses obtain here: despite the assertion that '*One size will not fit all'*, proposals include the need to '*look across sectors to include the infrastructure, software and common technical standards that will be needed to realize the benefits of more efficient assessment'* (DfES 2003-4, p. 37-8). Equally while recognizing the need for innovation in assessment, involving more than '*the 'pervasive multiple-choice question' format'*, many of the proposals for assessment seem to involve just that (e.g. p.36). The search for efficiency and national assessment frameworks sits ill however with socio-cultural learning theories, where learning is grounded in situated, participatory processes (e.g. Brown et al, 1989). Torrance (2000) also calls attention to the challenges for assessment arising from postmodern thinking. In a fundamental way, this raises doubts about the curriculum that might be taught (and assessed) in today's multicultural societies. As Torrance puts it:

> *Who is to say that one selection of knowledge is more appropriate than another; that one form of assessment renders a 'truer score' than another; indeed that a 'true score' can ever be produced for and adhere to an individual? Knowledge selections must be locally contingent, and assessment results must be a function of the interplay of task, context, individual response and assessor judgement.'*
>
> *(Torrance, 2000, p 179)*

Paradoxically of course, despite such fundamental challenges over the nature of knowledge itself, discourses around learning (and e-learning) in policy-making circles can often embody a view of knowledge which represents it as discrete and bounded, and indeed which seem to retrench around conventional views of literacy which do not take into account diversity in literacy practices and the multiculturalism which globalization would also imply (Johnson and Kress, 2003). Innovation in assessment does seem important then, but seems to conflict with demands for efficiency and national frameworks.

E-Learning as Practice: Student Interviews

Woolgar (2002) points to the 'sweeping grandiloquence' of many of the rationales for information technologies, arguing that we should 'focus much more on bottom-up experiences, on the nitty-gritty of actually making the damn modem work' (2002, p. 7), and then on how these experiences relate to wider societal issues. The second texts for analysis give us a 'bottom-up' insight to e-learning and internet technologies from a student perspective. They are transcripts of recorded interviews conducted in the context of research being carried out in relation to the development of an interactive web site to

explore online formative assessment with a small group of part-time doctoral students in higher education in England. As mid-career professionals, their ages range from those in their thirties to those in their sixties.

As part of a network of social practices, such interviews are situated within important conventions. Although superficially resembling a conversational dialogue, the interviewee is placed in the position of replying to questions from the interviewer, who therefore is in a position of power in the framing and construction of the dialogue. Nevertheless the researcher (also the writer) did aim to allow space for respondents to express their views, and to be open to dialogue and difference. The research on the website had been introduced from the beginning with an emphasis on the critical evaluation of its potential to support students' learning, so openness to difference in opinions was central to the purpose of the interview. On the other hand, one might ask to what extent the development of the website in itself provides an implicitly positive evaluation of e-learning. Indeed several of the students said that they had used our website more because of the research. In this way then, the research funding for our project, leading to my employment, the development of the site and the interviews I conducted to investigate the students' responses to its use, is an example of how e-learning is 'called into being' even within purportedly more critical frameworks.

In relation to the analysis of the interview texts, this is particularly focused on the different identities, or subject positions, adopted by our students. Fairclough (2003) sees identities being reflected through the evaluations represented, through what is attributed value and what is not, and through the commitment made to these evaluations. Firstly then, our students had a strong commitment to the value of face-to-face interactions in educational settings, and indeed some had chosen the programme for that reason, rather than distance alternatives. None spoke of the online facility as having been a motive in their choice. While all were using the internet, some were critical of the impact of internet technologies on their lives. In one case, taken here as an illustration, employer's expectations involving internet use were deeply resented and the issue of having to deal with work emails at home in the evening had lead to confrontation, with a strong personal investment in the dispute expressed in a metaphorical relation '*I came out like a rat fighting'*. This was a strongly contested issue then, related to work life balance:

> *like tonight, you know… if I do my emails tonight, when do I do them?.. I'm very vocal about it, and because they know I work very hard they can't argue with me, you know. and it's… it's … I just find it very difficult.*

The interrogative mood at the start of this section is rhetorical; the answer to the question is assumed, along with its evaluation (i.e. that this is self-evidently unreasonable). The sentence *because they know I work very hard they can't argue with me* begins with a strong assertion in declarative mode, and the causal clause acts to legitimize '*they can't argue with me*, which has a categoric deontic modalization (i.e. something that is represented as simply impossible). Here, as elsewhere when speaking of the employer, the use of *they*, rather than *we* draws attention to a demarcation of identities rather than a shared identity. Despite the strength of this position however, the excerpt closes with a

present verb tense (*I just find it*), suggesting that a resolution of these difficulties has not been achieved. Later when talking about responding to emails late at night, the use of deontic modality in the verb '*have to'* suggests an obligation imposed by external pressures, rather than experienced as a personal obligation. The issue is then textured in relation to a wider topic:

> *I just think. I just think this work ethic that we've got, and the hours we're doing in Europe, in England, I just think it's… it's just getting… it is… it's not funny, you know, and it's… it's quite stressful.*

The use of '*we*' encompasses here a European or English work place identity. Despite a high commitment to her work, this professional was experiencing real distress from the social practices related to email use within her workplace, practices which are represented as being part of a wider work ethic which is resisted. At a local level then, in stark opposition to that of policy discourses, the advent of internet technologies is certainly not an undisputed good, but can be a site of contestation.

Although this was one of the strongest expressions of anger over internet technologies, niggles emerged in many other interviews (cost, connectivity problems, institutional barriers to access, problems with software functions). At the same time the attribution of responsibility for these problems often seemed to be absorbed by the students themselves. Their difficulties were often constructed as being caused by their own equipment, or their inexperience in the medium. Some were taking active steps to change their IT facilities in order to improve internet access to our course. In another case a student seemed anxious to portray a high level of IT and internet use, and seemed unwilling to 'reveal' difficulties. The use of our website and its discussion forums was also seen as useful for developing IT knowledge and transferable skills, which were accepted as being important in the workplace. In different ways then, this suggests an internalisation of the discourses which associate IT skills with lifelong learning, as something that you simply 'have to have', involving a regime of truth and an emergent form of governmentality (Foucault, 1979), where individuals become self-policing in complying with demands made of them within society at large.

On the other hand, some have argued that 'computer literacy ideology' has little justification, that only a minority of employees will require high level computer expertise, while changes in technology will mean in any case that particular skills that might be taught today will quickly become irrelevant (Conlon, 2000, p. 111-112). Within this order of discourse, IT competence is nevertheless constructed as a given and those who do not have this seem to risk being marginalised, or even pathologised. The reactions of our learners suggest that the importance of information technology within our society has attained a status which might justify it being considered as figuring within a 'regime of truth', where '*'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.*' Important public actors conjoin to emphasise its importance, and a wide array of social technologies (incorporating the use of information technologies) construct these as necessary within our ordinary lives. Within such relations there seems little space for the

voices which would argue for more attention to 'nitty-gritty' experiences that Woolgar talks of. Indeed those with least access to these technologies seem least able to voice dissent about their use, or to seem reasonable in voicing opposition.

The Consultation as Social Practice

The consultation process took place both online and in face-to-face meetings which were organised specifically to discuss the strategy document, as well as at a variety of other events. A summary report of the organised events is available online, along with progress reports and updates on the status of the consultation. However one might express concern about the re-representation of areas of dissent that emerge within the consultation, and the shaping of meaning in this recontextualisation. One instance is the issue of the funding of the e-learning strategy; this surfaced as a concern in the responses to the online questionnaire, and is reported in the overview of its analysis as being '*a consistent theme in most responses, with the majority holding the view that the Government should underwrite the costs'* (DfES, 2004b, p.4). It is also reported as a concern of attendees of the face-to-face consultation events (DfES, 2004a, p 7-8). On the other hand, in the ministerial response to the results of the online consultation, these concerns are re-shaped, being represented as demonstrating that '*we need more imaginative approaches to funding*' (DfES, 2004b), so despite the concerns expressed within the consultation process, little commitment has so far been made by the policy-makers to support learning providers over this issue. At the same time, the consultation responses are nevertheless seen in the most recent progress report on the e-learning strategy as providing justification for the government now to '*drive forward our strategy for using technology to personalise education*' (DfES, 2004c).

The relationship of these positions seems to raise questions then about the ways in which the voices of respondents are co-opted within government policy-making. While the consultation process engages citizens in dialogue, the example above suggests that the dialogue may serve as a way of legitimating policy-making, rather than shaping it in ways that might fit with more radical democratic positions. In his analysis of different models of public participation in democratic processes, Delanty (2000) distinguishes between radical democracy and discursive democracy. In radical democracy a desire for user-centred welfare services is recognised, but not accommodated through an expansion of market forces into these services. Instead it seeks 'to abolish the distinction [between state and society] by radically empowering citizenship as democratic participation' (2000, p.37). This then fundamentally changes the relationship between providers and recipients of these services, and between the state and its citizens. On the other hand, he suggests that this model has been replaced under New Labour by 'discursive democracy' where symbolic importance is attached to processes of communitarian discussion, but where the formal decision-making structures are not substantially changed, so that these participating voices are not necessarily given substantial influence. As Williams (2004, p.6) points out, such consultation processes can serve to 'engender a sense of civil ownership' of decision-making practices. In an analysis of government documents, he found that this most often involved the public in 'issue networks, where the public is one of a large number of groups to be consulted by a 'lead authority'' (2004, p. 7). Although

the outcome of the consultation process is still awaited, the way thus far in which the particular issue of funding has been appropriated and re-shaped in ways that do not seem to fully reflect the depth of concern of the participants suggests that discursive rather than radical democracy is in play here.

A further point that might also be raised is the extent to which these methods of consultation taps into those who are already adept users of the online environment, rather than voices of those who are not so familiar with its practices. It must be acknowledged that presentations were made on the e-learning strategy at over 300 educational events, and the online consultation was accompanied by three face-to-face events held in England, attended by a total of 300 individuals and a summary report of these events is available. However the issue of representation is highlighted by one comment reported these events '*Good to know of Sheffield initiatives. Was there only e-publicity? Is this why only "the converted" (and a few Heads) attended?*' (DfES, 2004a, p 24); indeed concern about how representative the attendance was at these events was echoed in several other comments. Moreover, the breakdown of the online responses indicates a somewhat marginal participation by individuals within the education workforce. Of the 430 responses, 7 were head teachers for example, while 23 fell in the group Teacher/Lecturer/Trainer. It is difficult to see then if the consultation process managed to seek a broad range of views, particularly as the consultation addressed those involved in learning from early years to higher education and lifelong learning. As I have already noted above, the outcome of the online consultation process, where the majority of the online respondents agreed with the actions proposed in the strategy document, is seen however as legitimising the government policy unit's intentions to '*make ambitious and imaginative use of technology a central element in improving personalisation and choice across the education system'* (DfES, 2004c). There seems to be a danger then that this kind of consultation process might neutralise dissenting voices, even within practices which appear to give space for such dissent in similar ways to that identified by Williams (2004, p. 18), who found that 'public participation can be part of an authority's ongoing attempts to legitimise its actions and pre-empt counter action through the construction and representation of pre-existing support.'

Conclusion

This representation of the experience of our learners is an attempt to redress the balance in the orientation towards difference of the E-Learning Strategy Consultation Document, where the selection of interview data was made with the desire to represent a more complex and problematic picture. I have also attempted to highlight what I feel is a tendency towards a discursive construction of consensus within the consultation process itself, a construction which appears natural within the episteme of our times, involving a rather promotional, advocating message. The final policy outcomes of the consultation process have yet to become clear. However it does not seem entirely evident that public support was wide, even if the online questionnaire responses offered support for the strategy. Perhaps the recent debacle of the United Kingdom e-University (UKeU), which came into public view after the closure of the consultation process, and where substantial

public funds appear to have been squandered (see Morrison, 2004) will have encouraged a more quizzical attitude in British policy-making circles.

In striking this rather sceptical note, I would not wish to argue that internet technology cannot have potential benefits for learners in many different contexts. There are parts of the strategy document which I would agree with. In addition, I have been recently involved in a EU-funded project developing a blended learning environment to explore online formative assessment for part-time doctoral students where advantages were found by some students in the particular ways that the online environment was used (Pryor et al, 2004). Here we highlighted pedagogic design and the role of the tutor as being central, rather than ascribing the online technology itself an overriding importance. So, in contributing to this debate on the e-learning strategy, I would argue that without due attention to local and situated practice, and to the key role played by instructional design within these local contexts and therefore to the key role of the teaching profession at all levels, these potential benefits will remain illusory.

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