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Talking to the Students: Repertoires of a Syllabus

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Abstract

The last decades have seen a shift from the traditional modes of teaching to the joint thinking about the teaching and learning activities, with emphasis of constructive alignment to achieve this educational setting. However, to some extent efforts to implement constructive alignment and to communicate these changes has not progressed as smoothly as hoped. This paper employs discourse analysis on a syllabus to identify the repertoires used to construct the text and to communicate to the intended parties, and tries to track these to the ideas represented in constructive alignment literature.

Keywords: discourse analysis, interpretative repertoires, syllabus, constructive alignment
Introduction

The last two decades have seen a shift from the traditional modes of teaching to the teaching and learning activities, with a student centered design. While the shift can be traced to many causes – ranging from the diffusion of new public management ideas to the education sector, to the increase of people continuing in higher levels of education compared with the past – the movement seems to have gradually converged in most of the countries to an outcomes based education (OBE) (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

Though used as an overarching term, as Biggs and Tang (2007) argue, there are different assumptions behind different schools of thought that are put under the umbrella term of OBE. Whereas some versions adopted an individual level outcomes based system, others have focused more on the institutional outcomes, the so-called deliverables. The historically latest set of assumptions focus on the teaching and learning activities themselves rather than the individual or institutional, and argue that teaching and learning are inseparable activities and thus the modes of education that focus on only one side are obsolete.

These assumptions are easily linked to other schools of thought that deal with modern education, such as transformative and self-learning activities (Mezirow, 1997; Pilling-Cormick, 1997), in which the learner would, during and at the end of education would be able to self reflect and possess the tools for critical thinking.

However, though the ideas seems to have been adopted globally, as expressed by various scholars one meets around, it is also possible that this catch up was achieved by the “copy-paste” techniques that took the language of the OBE and put them without giving particular attention to the nuances of the project at hand. Such a
technique, while might prove a successful attempt if one considers it as an outcome of an institutional nature has many pitfalls that would become apparent as time goes by and the promised results would not be achieved in real terms. Such instances were seen during several integration phases in Bologna process where schedules of the courses were adapted, in which a key syllabus is translated nearly verbatim to the local language and the education system run as it normally did before. Thus while fulfilling the official criteria of paying attention to the policy recommendations, the real enactment of the very changes to the education system to enable the individual students to become active participants in the teaching and learning activities were left to be “filled up” after a few years of failing programmes. Thus, the courses have to be continuously re-evaluated to ascertain that the positive consequences associated with the OBE were realized as well as the methods to achieve them, such as the overarching method of constructive alignment (CA), was properly implemented.

One way to see if such a change has occurred is to analyse, among other aspects of course, the syllabus of the courses given. As the backbone – and to some extent officially binding documents – of the course that sets out the outcomes of the courses, usually termed as intended outcomes, these documents provide an “in” to what the course has as its foundations. The syllabus, as this overarching document, would have references, though perhaps not explicitly, to the nature of the course. Thus the aim of this paper is to track the effects of the OBE and CA in a syllabus for a course which the author took part in teaching. The choice of method to achieve this aim is discourse analysis, more specifically, interpretative repertoires, which is detailed in the second section. Third section presents the data collection and methodology, while the analysis is provided in the fourth section. Section five concludes and suggests further research areas to complement the analysis performed.
Interpretative Repertoires

IR constitute a strain of discursive psychology, attributed to the works of Nigel Edley, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (Edley & Wetherell, 1995, 1997; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988; Wetherell, 1998) who drew upon the work of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984/2003) concerning the scientists’ discourse. IR shares, as with other strains of discursive psychology, three core principles as to what discourse is (Wiggins & Potter, 2008): (1) discourse is constructed and constructive: while the discourse is constructed by the people – assembling words, images – the people are at the same time constructed by the very same discourse; (2) discourse is action-oriented, be it to blame, justify, invite or to compliment, discourse is the primary medium to achieve these actions; (3) discourse is embedded in a context.

Wetherell and Potter (1988, 172) defined IR as “bounded language units”, that are “systematically related sets of terms, often with stylistic and grammatical coherence, and often organised around one or more metaphors” (Potter, 1996), and as “culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes” (Wetherell, 1998, p. 400). They are “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena” (Potter and Wetherell 1987, p. 149). IR enable the users to draw from parallel, as well as paradoxical repertoires, and assume different roles in relation to the situation. The users engage in social action on micro level, managing their positions by drawing from macro level discourses to sustain their arguments. This flexibility of changing roles creates the freedom to change positions when faced with opposing arguments, either explicit or implicit, and enable users to perform different actions to maintain their position as well as influence others.
This action oriented stance of IR makes it a suitable lens to use while looking at the evaluated course material. The authors of the material, the teacher(s), have taken the role of information disseminators with a stake in both enticing the students to choose their course as well as providing an accurate picture of what to expect from the course. In the same material, the teachers also have various university bodies and other stakeholders to satisfy, with different information demands, such as compliance to the rules set at the institution/university level as well as abidance to national guidelines.

**Data Collection and Methodology**

Before the analysis of the text, the methods employed to analyse the material should be further detailed, as interpretative repertoires as elaborated above by itself do not provide a clear-cut method.

As mentioned previously, the manuscript chosen for analysis is a syllabus that the author would be involved in teaching, and thus has primary access to the document. The course is taken over from another division that has historical ties to the new division giving the course. Written documents are mediated resources and thus lack some of the versatility of naturally occurring language use – as in an interview or observation, where the actors engage in multiple discursive practices for discursive solutions – they still represent a type of naturalistic data that is exempt from the influence of the researcher, and is thus suitable for discourse analysis.

Mainly discourse analysis uses the core steps of coding and analysing the text, usually after reading the data before beginning these processes and continuing the readings during the coding and analysis, as an iterative process in which the

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1 The author was not involved in writing of the syllabus - though participated in discussing what are the issues in his particular theme in the course – as the actual writing of the syllabus was done by senior faculty.
researcher reaches a saturation point after numerous careful re-readings. However, due to the rich nature of data gathered, one needs more of a structure when looking for the patterns in the data, and even then the research mostly keeps its intuitive feeling due to having the discourse as its object.

One such way of limiting what to look for, is provided by the discursive constructionism (Potter & Hepburn, 2008), which compromises three classes: (i) category entitlement and interest management, in which the category entitlements of the social actors are analysed in terms of how they are constructed and opposed, (ii) discursive accountability, in which the narrators’ use of language to manage their accountability is analysed, and (iii) practices of narration, in which the text is scoured for cues of changes in narration.

By using these three classes as the guides, after the initial reading the paper was manually cut into sentences compromising the individual paragraphs. The rationale of opting out for an automatic rendering was to see the individual sentences in relation to the prior and following sentences, and thus have a more in context reading of the sentences. The extracts of data, chosen to emphasize the interpretative practices employed by the authors of the text, are provided in the next section, as normal paragraphs for easier reading. The interpretative repertoires are identified and the functions of the repertoires are discussed through the extracts.

**Repertoires of a Syllabus**

Before presenting the repertoires, a few words on the selected syllabus are needed to provide some information to contextualize the analysis. As mentioned previously, the manuscript chosen for analysis is a syllabus that the author is involved with teaching, and thus has primary access to the document and the writers of the syllabus. The course itself has historical ties to the division that the author is situated
at. It was conceived by a senior faculty at the time of its inception, however, when the division changed their department, the people involved with the teaching of the course remained in the old department – a department that mostly houses engineering divisions. Last year saw the division, in their new department – one that houses a wide spectrum of divisions from Political Science to Applied Thermodynamics and Fluid Mechanics – offered to take up the course again. After some thought, the course was divided into five themes to reflect the competence of the teachers in the division, as well as provide the students a “holistic” understanding of the issues related to the IT evaluation. The course is offered mainly to the students from engineering background, with the division mostly situated as one of management control.

**Teaching as Keeping Status-quo**

The first repertoire identified in this syllabus revolves around the roles of the student and the teacher that forms a core of the OBE and CA. These roles, though fluid, are taken as an interaction in these two schools of though, diverging from the older ideas of teacher as the holder of the wisdom and student as the apprentice that learns from the master, a model in which the teachers are “tellers of truth who inculcate knowledge in students” (Cohen, 1988, p. 39). In the modern ideas of OBE, the teacher performs as the leader of the situation, counseling the student, who is actively learning through interaction with the surrounding environment. Thus, while there might be a difference in the roles taken by the individuals, by the focus on interaction, and leading the students to come grips with the issues, the role of I and You, is blurred in OBE and CA: the student and the teacher come together to form We, to undertake teaching and learning activities. However, as can be seen, this convergence is missing in the syllabus, thus reflecting the dilemma introduced in the text by the influence of the traditional education models.
Extract 1: “In the course we will take an organizational/intentional perspective on information systems. This means that we will mainly focus on information systems that are used for a particular purpose, in an organization; that the systems is intended to generate some particular effects.”

This extract shows the first instance that “we” has been used in the text. Here the author uses and all-inclusive we, as both the teachers and the students shall focus on the issues tackled within the course. Thus, though not explicitly mentioned, the activities of the course shall be taken on by both the teachers and the students alike, though they might vary so as to the nature of the tasks. However, this all inclusive we is watered down as the text continues:

Extract 2: “We have structured the course in five conceptual themes.”

Extract 3: “The first theme will give you a deeper understanding of the conceptual roots of systems thinking and how to evaluate soft systems.”

As can be seen, in extract 2, we is used again, though this time as an exclusive we, referring to the teachers as a group, who had the power and authority to set up the task of designing the syllabus. Though usually the norm, such a one sided consideration of “what the students needs to learn”, can also take into consideration of what the students think they need to learn. Thus the turn from the all-inclusive we to the exclusive we is taken as a turn that the teachers take in the imaginary conversation in which the authority is asserted.

Such an authorisation is used in extract 3, where the students – you – is assured that they will achieve some kind of an understanding of the phenomena at hand. Also it is noteworthy how the students are put in a passive role as subjects that will be given an understanding. This contrasts with the active role foreseen in the OBE and CA, in which the students will come to an understanding. Here instead the
topic is externalised to the theme, in which the role of the teachers is occluded, and the students’ role is prescribed as the recipient of an understanding.

A final extract also highlights the all-inclusive we for both the teacher and student, and you generated throughout the text as the student, and the diverging view of the entitlements they have in the eyes of the teachers.

Extract 4: “There is always a risk in this type of assignment, that the work starts too late. Therefore we kick off the project assignment already before we have finished the theoretical part of the course. Already in the third week your group will present a project proposal to the rest of the class.”

Here, the externalised situation, using prior knowledge as a reference point to ascertain such instances, is that the students are late to begin their project assignment. This, while as mentioned probably stems from prior experience, highlights the divide between the student and the teacher, as the teacher has already assumed that the students will react in a similar way, and thus eroded their agency to act otherwise. The use of all-inclusive we creates the bond that would tie the student and the teacher, assuming that both parties will kick off and finish the project, as neither the student or the teacher can do so without the other party in the process. However, this is contrasted with the use of your group, the students are materialised as external to the “we” mentioned previously. The use of active voice for the students, though grammatically different then the passivity implied in Extract 1, the active role of the student is constrained by the assignment they are given by the faculty, to finish a project work. The use of already adds an urgency to the situation, building up on the first part of the extract, thus highlighting the power structure envisioned by the teachers, in which the students have to reminded about their tasks, and urged to do
them, a contrasting idea to the CA, in so far as to the erosion to the agency of the students.

**Education as Empowerment to Students**

Following the previous repertoire, in which the roles of the teacher and student haven’t converged to the extent imagined in the OBE and CA, this repertoire, in which the students are empowered in the classroom, shifts the balance of the overall situation to a more CA-centric perspective than the original. However, as seen before, though the repertoire leans more towards the modern understanding of education, there are other examples in the text that suggests otherwise.

The syllabus open with the aims of the course, and argues that through a holistic perspective, the students will comprehend the evaluation methods, search, analyse and apply selected literature and apply the methods in a project. Thus the outcome of the course is laid out, at least for the course level. There are no mentions of wider outcomes of the course.

The method to achieve these outcomes is through seminar/lectures that the student has to attend, and a final project exercise that will be a group assignment.

Extract 5: “The project assignment in the course counts for half of the credits. Your mission is to find an information system (or an information system that is about to be implemented) and apply all the perspectives on IT-evaluation that have been presented in the course. You are responsible for identifying the case that you want to work with. The system can be of any kind. But it will most likely be easier to apply the theoretical models (that we have discussed in the course) if you choose a system that is used/will be used in an organization, and that is aiming for some kind of apparent effects in this organization. We expect you to refer to all five perspectives,
but it is your choice if you treat them in equal proportions or if you want to give one of the perspectives more attention.”

Extract five relates to the issues discussed in the previous repertoire that draws from the older education models by the use of we and you as setting the parties of the teaching and learning activities apart. However, the agency taken from the students are introduced back, and they are given the autonomy, through the argument of given responsibility, to choose their own project.

The agency of the student is further enhanced by their inclusion to the “we”, as they have participated in the discussion through out the course. The teacher takes on a leader role by suggesting possible ways to make it easier for the students, thus has left the active role they took earlier, though implicitly. Though the teacher suggests, the student is still able to pursue another project – of course related to the course. The students are also given the choice of preferential treatment to a theme that was discussed in the course, though they have to analyse the project by all the themes present. This gives the students the chance to lean onto what they think is most important for them – be it as an easy project or what they want to work with in the future, thus the student is empowered.

The aims of the course, as mentioned before contains a list of verbs, that are mainly associated with higher levels of learning, such as applying and analysing, not just learning. Following such aims it is understandable that the students would have to be thusly empowered. Similar to extract 5, though to lesser extent, extract 6 a portion of such learning activities in which the students are empowered.

Extract 6: “The participants’ projects, their literature searches, and the exchange of knowledge between the workgroups form a central part of this course.
The role of the teachers is to give an overview of the areas involved, to give support and supervision to produce a good project.”

Beginning from the last part, in which the teachers’ role is discussed, it should be mentioned that though the expression remains true to the ideas of OBE and CA, the earlier mentions of we and you makes it harder for the realisation of a nearly equal footing for both parties to participate to the same extent in the teaching and learning activities.

Following the already discussed empowerment through choosing their own projects, the aims of the course are put into the central position in this extract, and the keywords of exchange of knowledge between the workgroups are used. Through the creation of such groups the students are encouraged to discuss with each other within the group, and after with other groups, on equal grounds the aspects of their chosen projects. By taking the teachers role as given, the students are put into the central stage in this text as the parties that have agency, though constrained by the official mandate, to act in a willful manner.

Discussion and a few More Thoughts of Inquiry

As seen, the talk of the teachers through the curriculum has shown variety, both in their use of grammar and bounded language units, as well as the social actions and the role entitlements that were achieved through such use.

The role entitlements created by the various uses of “we” and “you” has been detailed to flesh out the status-quo repertoire, highlighting how the teachers have created and maintained various positions throughout their talk. Through these positions they managed to speak to various requirements that are abound in the field, to be available to students and act as a guide, to be the holder of knowledge, as well
as creating the students position, as a receiver of knowledge, as well as a part of the whole group.

This role of the student was further fleshed out through the use of the empowerment repertoire: by paradoxical use of certain cues, the students were portrayed as agents that have the influence to set the tone during the course – even the literature could be chosen by their participation, though that didn’t happen – as well as the students who are to passively receive information presented to them. This paradoxical use of repertoire follows directly from the status-quo repertoire’s role entitlements created to both form a group and sustain the divides at the same time in the classroom.

Though the use of IR makes it hard to highlight some of the issues that can be linked to the situation at hand, at this point of the study, it is nevertheless necessary to dabble in some other parts of discourse analysis to link the issues to our, perhaps more lived in experiences. One such obvious lived in experience arises from the power relations that are abound in the classroom, and as such strains of critical discourse analysis, with their stance on power relations, would have some input to the issue at hand. Be it the more apparent power relations between the students and the teachers – with one party usually entitled to the power and authority – or the more outside of the classroom struggles among the faculty, departments and social and political structures, it is apparent that the parties to the setting do not necessarily have equal standing. As it was not the intention of this paper to analyse these power relations and their construction through language, it is easy to see how such power structures are sustained throughout the course material discussed. Following Thompson's (1984) idea that ideology is not neutral and one can see their articulation in the speech/text, the creation of teacher as the holder of knowledge and the student
as the passive receiver highlights how the use of language “serves to sustain relations
of domination” (p.4). Through the use of we and you, and shifts of agential power
embedded to the teachers and students, the teachers have created a linguistic
hegemony, which in line with the Gramscian ideas, “tended to codify and reinforce
the dominant viewpoint” (Gardiner cited in McLaren, 1995, p. 121).

Similar to the non-convergence repertoire, the power relations are also abound
in the empowerment repertoire. If Foucault's (2012, p. 86) argument that “power is
tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is
proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” is followed, the use of the
empowerment repertoire to give responsibility to the students can also signal the
masked power in this relationship. Just as the repertoire later on reversed the active
role of the student to a passive one – and thus showed a more “transparent” power
structure then the masked power, this empowerment repertoire side steps the fact that
it is the teacher that will assess and evaluate the work presented as the final project.
The students are also to prepare the projects by following the themes presented in the
course and not other themes one might find in the field.

When this study was presented, either verbally in the coffee room, or in more
formal venues, some other cues that relate these repertoires to the more power-
relations related issues came up. When talking to a colleague in the coffee room, in
relation to the use of different empowerment cues, and how the traditional sender-
receiver model is perhaps not appropriate, he replied: “Maybe I should change how I
teach according to the student… but I don’t”. This basic reply, though perhaps not so
discursively interesting, offers the insight of how the resistance to change prevails in
the mind of the teacher. Though the need of such a change can be admitted, “maybe I
should change”, such an action is closed off indefinitely.
More on the use of language, as highlighted in this study, a colleague, in a formal presentation setting argued that, he himself uses this “false-empowerment” too, when he is teaching. The self-reflective admission of the paradoxical use of the repertoire – and identifying with the part that uses the language to give a “sense” of empowerment whereas the situation still has clear cut power asymmetries and lack of agency – shows that the repertoires presented here resonates not just with the language used in course material, but also with the “actual teaching”. Another colleague, herself coming from gender studies and looking at the time working with feminist pedagogy, argued that used language is “patronizing”, so far that the students are given some sense of equality, whereas it is actually the teacher that actually has the power, and the students are not active participants of a dialogue here.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, the aim was to track the ideas of OBE and CA in a syllabus, through the use of discourse analysis. The results are in parallel with earlier research on interpretative repertoire, the chosen discourse analysis school, as such that there are various repertoires at work when one expresses himself.

One repertoire identified was structured around the roles of the student and teachers. Though the role of the teacher was coined as a supporter and supervisor, the language used, by making clear distinctions of you as the student created power structures that are not in line with a supporter supervisor role of the teacher, but rather of a master-student relation found in older educational models. By using such distinction, and eroding the agency of the student, the syllabus drew from an educational paradigm that is not necessarily compatible with OBE and CA to the extent that the role of the teacher is left vague – as the implied roles are not barely
support and supervise – and the combination of teaching and learning activities are left out of the picture.

However, this repertoire was balanced with the introduction of the agency in the students, through express option of choice regarding their project. The use of word “responsible” makes this more apparent when one considers other words – like able, permitted, allowed – that can be used in similar settings. Through their ability to chose, not the project, but also the focal theme when analyzing the project, the students are given a more equal footing with the teachers. It is through this group work, more than the actual lecture and seminars that the course aims are realized, and the actual teaching and learning activities, in conjugation takes place.

The use of only one syllabus, for only one course makes the findings of this paper not generalizable, however it opens up some venues for further investigation. One such venue would be to contrast the syllabus with an earlier one, and do a through analysis of the differences and similarities to enhance the results of this paper. Another further research option, as evident as the first one would be to use similar analysis for a wider range of courses to see if the suggested repertoires are found in institutional level. Both suggestions can be further enhanced by employing different tools of analysis of both from a similar school of thought – such as critical discourse analysis as hinted in the discussion section – as well as others. Of course, without saying, use of naturally occurring data, such as observations when the syllabus is being discussed, or even a coffee room discussion, as the one quote in the discussion shows, would open up richer data sources for all analysis methods mentioned.

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