

“Discourse Politics” – Lifelong learning as a post-modern power game? An exemplary analysis of present developments in Germany

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We know of course that “lifelong learning” is not a concept in the strictly theoretical sense. It remains fairly vague and even the history of the label does not make anything much clearer. Nevertheless the label is very popular at present – certainly not only in Germany (cf. here representing others Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Field, 2000; Alheit & von Felden (eds), 2009). Yet the connotative aura of the double-word – at least in Germany – has no appeal. Lifelong learning sounds a bit dull, almost old-fashioned and lacking in any inspiration so far as concepts and programmes are concerned. Far more than 50% of the announcements, papers, commentaries and statements are not scientific in the classical sense, but in a strange grey zone between science, practice and politics, making it difficult to place convincingly the conventional instruments of empirical research (see here also Field, 2000).

And yet – this is perhaps a rather risky hypothesis at the outset – the talk about lifelong learning has had some results. Not just in terms of senior citizens popping along to adult education centres or the kindergarten stuffing the kids – who have just got beyond the mother-child dyad – full with learning techniques which will keep them going until old age, but in a way that a certain “environment of discourse” is being created which is beginning to change our educational landscapes.

So here we have the concept which has like practically no other dominated the culture of discussion in the social sciences in the past 30 years: “*discourse*”. In one sense it is rather like the business with the label “lifelong learning”. It is used in an inflationary way and describes phenomena which have absolute nothing in common. Critical titles like “*The Chatter about Discourse*” (Das Gerede vom Diskurs), as found in the Austrian Journal for Historical Science (Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft), are not atypical and – in view of the sheer mass of publications with contradictory statements on the subject – by no means unjustified. However, the concept of discourse is not exactly boring. It has appeal. Not only because renowned theorists from Habermas to Foucault have taken it up, but because it denotes a field of study which with all methodical reservations is genuinely challenging and worthwhile.

The following remarks will be dealing briefly with the concept of discourse analysis in the tradition of Michel Foucault and sketch the results of our own current research (1). In spite of some reservations concerning the methodical precision of Foucault’s work some of his ideas are more inspiring than for example the intelligent and much more consistent concepts of Jürgen Habermas.

Here another of Foucault’s ideas proves useful, one which he explained in his later work and which does a great deal to clarify the impact on the educational politics of the lifelong learning discourse in Germany – the notion of “governmentality” (2). It is certainly not possible to produce here a highly differentiated Foucault exegesis, but perhaps we can take a closer look at Foucault’s discoveries to prepare an instrument which will be used at the third stage of our considerations.

I want to demonstrate with two short interpretational examples on the subjects of “learning” and “equality of educational opportunities” how the talk of lifelong learning, especially on a political level, can and must be criticised in a legitimate way (3). This essay will end with a short résumé (4).

1. On the “discourse quality” of lifelong learning

Certainly no systematic derivation of the discourse concept can be expected from the following considerations. For that there is no space here and in any case the valuable study of Reiner Keller on discourse analysis provides a useful contribution from the view of the sociology of knowledge (Keller, 2005). The interesting thing about discourse here is a quality which has always challenged me as a researcher of biography: its “relative lack of subject”, which produces in Foucault’s work precisely “subjectivising”. The following considerations are an attempt to explain this.

Reality is constructed. Since the so-called “constructionist turn” in the social and also the educational sciences this is almost a trite statement (see here Alheit & Dausien, 2000). The radical constructivists point to the self-referential activity of the brain, meaning by this that of the individual brain. This “genetic individualism”, which by the way goes back to the middle and later work of Piaget, is the paradigm of all serious theoretical psychological learning theories which are relevant here.

As a biography researcher with more than 25 years of empirical practice, I have learnt that it makes sense to view a moderate constructivism as plausible. Our concept of “biographicity” is the model for it: the fact, which has been empirically well documented, that we all in our own way, in accordance with the learning processes demanded by society, must learn that this ability is required in order to link (or simply to ignore as irrelevant) new experiences on those we have already made in order to come to terms with the challenges of late modern societies (see here Alheit, 1993, Alheit & Dausien, 1996, 2000). It is not the “inputs” with which we find ourselves presented and which are supposed to lead to the expected “outputs” which are in the first place so interesting, but in a certain sense the kind of “*intakes*”, the particular nature of which can only be understood through the inner logic of the biographical experiences we have already made. “*Biographicity*” is, so to speak, the personal code with which we make our new experiences – that is, our own individual language of experience, into which we have to “translate” the challenge of the new in order to cope with it. Every learning process in the making appears in principle to work in this way, so the thesis is not so risky that all learning is in a certain sense “biographical learning” and that its basic structure could have something to do with the phenomenon of “biographicity”.

But perhaps the discourse concept of Foucault teaches us that our potential of “intaking” is limited. In learning processes we are of course always concerned with that “biographical code”, but it could be that the potential for the alignment of these inner resources is influenced by previous discourses which have had to be dealt with, in other words, that the construction principle is not just determined from within, but, as it were, remains “contaminated” from the outside. Or more radically still: that it is first the logic of this “contamination” which makes up this modern subjectivisation (a specific “submission” in the original Latin sense of the word under new historical conditions).

This Foucault “subject” (*‘the one submitting him/herself’*) has indeed only few points of contact with the active bearer of the biographical constructions of self and the world. But perhaps a critical glance at “lifelong learning” makes a correction of the constructivist euphemisms necessary. For one of the problematical properties which Foucault attributes to discourses, their selectivity, seems certainly to be attached to the lifelong learning discourse. The amazing prognosis on the problematical consequences of the LLL discourse, which was published by the OECD in 1997 already, makes this character of exclusion convincingly clear:

“For those who have successful experience of education, and who see themselves as capable learners, continuing learning is an enriching experience, which increases their sense of control over their own lives and their society. For those who are excluded from this process, however, or who choose not to participate, the generalisation of lifelong learning may only have the effect of increasing their isolation from the world of the “knowledge-rich”. The consequences are economic, in under-used human capacity and increased welfare expenditure, and social, in terms of alienation and decaying social infrastructure.” (OECD, 1997: p.1)

So Foucault could be right that there is, so to speak, “above” the level of the social actors, an instance which regulates things structurally, which then move in this or that direction, i.e. discourses. We shall have to see how such “instances” work. – But then can one grant “lifelong learning” a discourse status of this kind at all? There are certainly many reasons for not doing so. The concept is inflationary and remains basically pretty vague. But then precisely the diffusiveness of the concept seems to have a potential for political control which is worth analysing.

2. On the “governmentality” of lifelong learning processes

Worthy of our interest then are the political effects which immediately touch the level of the subjects. Foucault’s idea of “governmentality” looks like being helpful here. This idea goes back to a series of lectures by Foucault at the Collège de France in the years 1977/78, which is something of a correction on his own architecture of the power-knowledge complex which he had developed in *“Discipline and Punish”* (Foucault, 1976) or in *“The Will to Knowledge”* (Foucault, 1977). Subject of the lecture series was the “Genealogy of the Modern State”, which he understands not as a new and functional consistent institutional and administrative structure, but, to put it in his own words, as a “totalisation mechanism” (Foucault, 1987: p.248).

Just like Elias (1969) Foucault is interested in the simultaneous long-term process of the development of modern statehood and modern subjectiveness. And just as with Elias the concept of civilisation covers to a certain extent both becoming a subject and the formation of the state, so it is with Foucault and the concept of “government”. In contrast to Elias, who sees here a certain logical development, Foucault concentrates on an analysis of heterogeneous and discontinuous “arts of government” (cf. Foucault, 2000: p.42). At the centre there remains the interesting observation that the modern state is the result of a liaison of “political” and “pastoral” techniques of power (cf. Foucault, 1987, p.248). What does this mean?

“Pastoral power” is according to Foucault a Christian religious conception, where it is a matter of the relationship of the leadership between “the shepherd” and “his flock”, so to speak of the “government of souls” (ibid.: p.249). Historically the emergence of this idea can be explained by the fact that Christianity turned from being a community of religiously ardent people in the early middle ages into a mass church, in which a Christian way of life appeared to be only secured in a long-term sense if the individual was prepared to take over personal responsibility for his salvation. The institution of confession, at first only once a year, but then with increasing frequency, “trained” this newly developed self-control. “Pastoral power” meant then that the subject began to “rule” him or herself in this sense (cf. here Hahn, 1982, 1987; Alheit & Hanses, 2003).

This governmentality concept becomes according to Foucault secularised and extended in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries (cf. Foucault, 2000). The sovereignty of rule becomes separated from the figure of the “prince” and started to be the abstract task of each and every one. Foucault is particularly interested in how disciplinary techniques change, how security mechanisms develop and how the relationship between state and economy changes. His concluding diagnosis deals with, as he says, a “generalisation of the economic form” (cf. ibid.: p.261), which has two drastic effects: it controls even the non-economic areas of social relationships and individual needs (and, of course, also development and learning affairs), placing contemporary politics, as Foucault puts it, “before a sort of permanent economic tribunal” (Lecture held on 21.3.1979; quoting Lemke, no date, p.9). The special thing about the governmentality phenomenon however remains the fact that in modernity the new techniques of power and rule only function when the subjects concerned form complementary “self techniques” which link up with the techniques of rule. And it is precisely at this juncture that discourses seem to be of great importance.

This can be shown in a selected example. A section of the famous 2001 model programme of the federal and states conference on lifelong learning and precisely the part on “Self responsibility and self-direction of the person learning” (Bund-Länder-Konferenz (Ed.), 2001, p. 8ff.) provides surprisingly precise information on what is today commonly understood by “lifelong learning”. A quotation from the introduction is symptomatic:

“The denomination to lifelong learning demands more than overcoming the notion that one has at the end of trade or professional training “done with learning”.. [...] The call to lifelong learning is linked rather with a change in viewing learning itself and a change on the part of teachers towards their professional action and of those learning towards their learning.” (Bund-Länder-Konferenz (Ed.), 2001, p. 8)¹

The form of the text must be taken quite seriously. It is a matter here of a “denomination to lifelong learning”. Even without any expertise in religious science it is immediately clear that there is in these formulations something of that “pastoral power” described by Foucault. Denominations are in terms of religious sociology acts to be repeated periodically, regularly feeling oneself as belonging to a context (religious community), an ideology (religious conviction) and a practice (e.g. a religious service) and so also stabilizing the personal and collective basic orientation (cf. as representative Hahn, 1982). This does not at the start have very much to do with “learning”. A “change of attitude” is called for on the part of the protagonists – in the pseudo-religious context of the framework given we could legitimately say: a “conversion”. We do not want in the interpretation to stretch too far this remarkable proximity to the religious sphere, but what can be reconstructed here has little to do with scientific considerations on lifelong learning, though definitely a great deal with the “self techniques” of Foucault, which have the task of completing the techniques of rule, i.e. with a subtle form of “governmentality” (cf. once more Foucault, 1993, 2000). Let us take a further look:

“The questions concerning the best possible organisation of learning, the assigning of tasks in terms of quality between the teachers and the students and thereafter, who takes on, can take on or must take on responsibility for what processes on the various occasions and forms of learning, fresh answers must be found in the framework of the model test programme.” (Bund-Länder-Konferenz (Ed.), 2001: p.8)

The tone now seems to be changing unintentionally. It is a matter of “the best possible organisation of learning” or of “the assigning of tasks in terms of quality”, i.e. in the Foucault context concerning the techniques of rule: assessment, measurement, differentiation. – Who sets the standards? The frame is introduced and this points, as it were, to an instance outside the learning process. It is a question of dealing with orders booked. Responsibilities “must” be taken on, questions “must” be given fresh answers. In other words, we discover a governmental basic tendency: “Conviction” and “conversion” on the one hand (secularised “pastoral power” according to Foucault) and subordination on the other (the development of specific “self-techniques”). Does this really fit in with the goals aimed at with “self-directed learning”?

Let us take a look at the text: “Self-directed learning is not the opposite of externally controlled learning.” (ibid.: p.9) Even this is logically treacherous. It seems to mean that you can learn “externally controlled”, so to speak, “in a self-directed way” – a rather strange, but evidently a perfectly imaginable idea. The original text puts us in the picture:

“Even in externally controlled teaching, seminar or other learning situations it is basically those learning who make the decisions (...) External control of learning [is] an illusion.” (ibid.: p.9)

Does this now mean that people learn what they want – their whole lives long? Is the constructivist paradigm shift becoming “ratified”, not only in adult education (cf. here Alheit & Dausien, 1996) but also politically? Or does it not really mean:

¹ Translation of all the following quotations by the author.

“Self-directed learning is not learning at random. Even self-directed learning is always context-bound. The form of learning, for example by framework conditions which are aimed at results does not change the self-directing quality for the learner, and yet neither the learning process nor the result of learning is done at random. The form of learning, the framework conditions for learning makes self-directed learning aimed at results and goals.” (cf. Bund-Länder-Konferenz (Ed.), 2001, p.9)

Here again the power of the “frame instance” comes out clearly. It remains symptomatically anonymous. Who produces the aiming at results and goals, which are supposed to be neutral? Who ensures that the processes of self-direction do not fall by the wayside? – Self-directed learning in usable contexts directed from the outside appears to be one of the hidden aspects of the German lifelong learning discourse. The label of “self-directed learning” (as early as Knowles (1975) on the discussion running at the time, cf. Reischmann, 1997), used in the American discussion in an inflationary way, makes this trend clear. Self-help in learning processes can also become forced “self-technology”. Foucault’s instruments of analysis are certainly very useful here.

3. Forms of “discourse politics”: the subtle swapping of contents

But let us consider a second aspect, the matter of “educational opportunities”. It is interesting to note that this concept is not to be found in official papers before the turn of the century. Although the subject plays an important part in international documents, it is, so to speak, neutralised in the German discourse. Guenther Dohmen in his initiation study of 1996 (with reference to the Faure Report of 1973) states with completely exaggerated blanket criticism:

“Instead of developing the 50% of human talent which is lying unused, what the traditional schools and educational institutions throughout the world do is to perpetuate the existing differences in education. So there is not much point in putting more money into the fostering of these institutions.” (Dohmen, 1996, p.15-16)

Now this radical gesture does not have the effect of dealing in a productive and differentiated way with the problem of the existing differences in education. Research even before PISA was quite able to describe the very different effects of various educational systems and to identify the particular disadvantages of the German system. This sweeping criticism provides encouragement to leave the educational system altogether and to look for salvation for lifelong learning in “situational learning” or in “everyday learning”, to look for alternatives which have no effect like “learning networks” and to suggest with labels like “learning society” or “knowledge society” one of those epochal dawns of a new age which usually end up nowhere. A structural problem is certainly presented by the German cultural federalism, which prevents effective national educational strategies of the kind to be found in Great Britain from being developed, thus pushing lifelong learning out into the side-lines, where it is dependent on initiatives from central government. But even from the perspective of the red-green coalition after 1998, which at least did not ignore the matter, we can identify connotative shifts of emphasis:

“Looking for a way to give our children, young people and adults the best possible opportunities for realising their capabilities and interests – this was a decisive question taken up by the Forum for Education. How can we recognize and encourage talent early enough? How can disadvantages be prevented and removed in the early stages? (Press release of the Federal Ministry for Educational Research, BMBF, 28.11.2001)

This official statement of the former Federal Minister for Education, Edelgard Bulmahn, on the completion of the two years work of the “Forum for Education” set up by herself in the year 2001 makes it clear that the matter of educational opportunity is certainly once more on the agenda of the red-green government, but it gives us a glimpse into the changed attitude. So it is no longer a matter of providing “educational opportunities for all”, as was the call in the early 1970s, but of providing “adequate support” of the gifted, thus distinguishing different target groups: the gifted and the disadvantaged. Looking at it more closely we can see that

this position played a part only at the start of the “Forum for Education”. A press release of 1999 contains the statement:

“How can we reduce the number of people leaving school without any qualifications and improve the opportunities of the gifted? How should particularly gifted people be given the proper opportunities?” (Press release of the Forum for Education 1999)

So here too the contrasting target groups – it almost looks as though with all the effort which is needed being expended on behalf of the “disadvantaged” it is necessary to bring in as an afterthought, as it were, a few thoughts on the particularly gifted in order to satisfy their lobby too. A hermeneutic detailed analysis brings light to bear on another aspect. It is no longer a matter of “educational opportunity”, but of opportunities on the employment market. In other words, the discourse on education is subject to precisely the same latent process which Foucault classes in principle as neo-liberal modernisation: as a “generalisation of the economic form”.

Daniela Rothe has convincingly shown that in the discourse form of that “Forum for Education” the aspect of equality of opportunity, which was in any case only rudimentarily developed, has completely disappeared and is now unrecognizable. Political options of the labour market have taken its place (Rothe, 2009, p.89 ff.).

We can observe here another much more repressive side of governmentality. The lifelong learning discourse under investigation is changing and becoming more pointed. While it is increasingly being sold out to the primacy of the economy it is forcing the subjects affected either to develop “self-techniques”, which are much the same as an unbroken self-instrumentalisation (full-time employed with incomes below the minimum wage are examples of this), or to bail out completely from the contexts of employment and social security – in other words, to approach the scenario mentioned above which the OECD already prognosticated in 1997 for the “educational losers”.

4. Science and the business of discourse

And now by way of summary: The fragile discourse on lifelong learning in Germany is by no means a surrogate, but in fact a kind of “post-modern (neo-liberal) power game”. Foucault’s suggestions have shown that we must grant that even a shabby “pseudo-discourse” can have considerable effect like patterns of “governmentality”, which have produced subtle “self-techniques”, but which at the same time have been able to extend the arsenal of the Foucault “techniques of ruling”. The “generalisation of the economic form” is at least an undercurrent tendency. Lifelong learning as a phenomenon of discourse is then nothing less than trivial. Nevertheless this discourse does retain in Germany something of that air which António Nóvoa has called a “planetspeak discourse”, a phenomenon which has neither a social home nor an origin (Nóvoa, 2002, in: Nóvoa & Lawn (Eds.), 2002; cf. also Fejes, 2006). We are really talking about something which is important and which at the same time we cannot get our hands on – inescapable for all, but also unspecific and therefore something which cannot easily be scientifically verified. Is this only a matter of German cultural federalism – meaning then that we have in fact very little influence on the concept of pre-school education as regards lifelong learning, none at all on the curricula of schools and certainly not on the concepts of universities? Could it not be that we as scientists are hiding behind this “planetspeak discourse” because it excuses us from the duty of taking up sides, because its diffuseness is pleasing and because the arbitrary linking of “chatter” and “power” turns us off when it comes to serious empirical analysis? We can’t quite rule it out. Yet my fragmentary analyses already show that we are not only able to find out more about this “planetspeak discourse” and its framework conditions, which may relate very closely to the scene in Germany, but additionally that we as scientists might also have a certain duty to discover the possibly risky consequences of the lifelong learning discourse.

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