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Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners
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Concept invited a range of practitioners to select a chapter from the Guide, and provide an introduction explaining its particular usefulness to practice.

CHAPTER 9: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

With an introduction by **Anne O'Donnell,** Anne works in independent advocacy, co-ordinating LEARN, an education project which delivers courses based on the experiences and voices of people with lived experience of mental health issues. www.capsadvocacy.org/learn
Her particular interests are in how activism and scholarship can be used together.

It's frustrating having the same discussions over and over! We share our opinions and our experiences, we make our case for one position over another, but nothing much comes of it. When I hear particular topics come up, I have that familiar thought 'oh no, here we go again' and my mind just wants to leave.

For example, I am active in various ways in mental health and I find myself turning off when certain topics come up - stigma, the need to be open about having mental health issues, medication… Every community or issue has similar topics! They are important topics and they need to be discussed. But too often we just state our opinions and nothing much changes, in our minds or in our actions. So how do we talk about them meaningfully and critically?

It feels worse when it's a group I am facilitating! I should be doing something, anything, to shift the discussion forward, to make people think more deeply, to make them come up with some action plan, to DO SOMETHING. It's an odd experience, this inner taskmaster rising up to take me and to take the group in hand. So much for valuing everyone's contribution and being led by the group!

I think Critical Discourse Analysis can offer us a way forward. Reading the chapter in the Guide, I went from 'What the hell is this?' to 'Ooooh, this could be good!'

As far as I understand it, CDA offers a straightforward way of taking something familiar and defamiliarising it. Describing before responding - asking what is being shown or said, what language is used, what is going on? It's too easy to skip over this step, to just talk about what we think is there, and rush on to stating our usual opinion. So I can see that doing this in a group can encourage a different kind of discussion.

By taking this time to stop, and look, and listen before leaping into action, I think we will more easily be able to start asking the most interesting questions why? and so

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what? Why has this particular picture, or documentary, or newspaper story been produced in this way? Why now? And so what? Why should we care?

And then, we should be more able to decide on what, if any, action we might like to take.

Introduction

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been largely developed academically and can seem hard to apply in educational practice. However, it is worth persevering with. CDA has its roots in the development of theory about how language and power connect through 'textual' messages to shape our thinking and behaviour, often without our conscious awareness. It can be a really useful tool if adapted and applied by practitioners working with a variety of different groups in communities.

In the current communication age, the significance of 'textual' messages which we are continually bombarded with, has multiplied. Yet our capacity to decode these messages is often assumed rather than explored educationally. The power of these forms of communication is that they can influence our outlook precisely because we give them little thought (see chapter 6). In this chapter we provide a basic framework for decoding texts, which can be developed in a variety of different ways.

What do we mean by text?

By text we mean the following types of communication media which includes visual and iconic messages as well as written forms. In many cases they combine across different media:

- Advertising
- Newspapers
- Television broadcasts
- Posters
- Images
- Written texts
- Television shows: 'soaps' and comedy in particular
- Radio shows
- Speeches
- Sporting events
- Websites
- Social media

The focus of CDA might, for example, be particular issues identified by participants or those that are current such as refugees, migration, austerity, Brexit etc.

Framework for decoding texts

Below is a three-stage process of decoding texts and their interconnections:

Stage one is a descriptive one whereby groups are asked to identify the components of the textual message. A simple question can be 'what do you see/ read in the text?'

In complex multi-media texts this can be difficult to answer because words, images, clothes, colours, and symbols might be significant ways in which people understand meanings but may not stand out, at first, as part of the message being conveyed. The important thing is to consider all the components of the message as far as possible.

Stage two involves making sense of what is being conveyed in the text by participants making sense of the gestures, expressions, body language, feelings and mood which is conveyed in the text. Participants can be asked 'what does it mean to you?' This open question enables the group to interpret the text in light of their own experience and to hear alternative interpretations of the same message.

Further probing questions could include interpretation of 'who is the text aimed at?' 'How are people described/named?' 'What actions do people take?'

Stage three involves explaining the meaning of the text in terms of the wider social context and inequalities of power. A simple question like 'what is the message about?' 'Why was it produced?' 'What values and beliefs are behind the text?' can reveal the interests which might be shaping it, and the social order which is shaping those interests. The analysis can then penetrate into the ideologies implicit in the text (See Chapter 1), the assumptions made, and how the message reinforces existing relations of power and inequality, or how they might help to challenge them.

Various different questions can open up these issues:

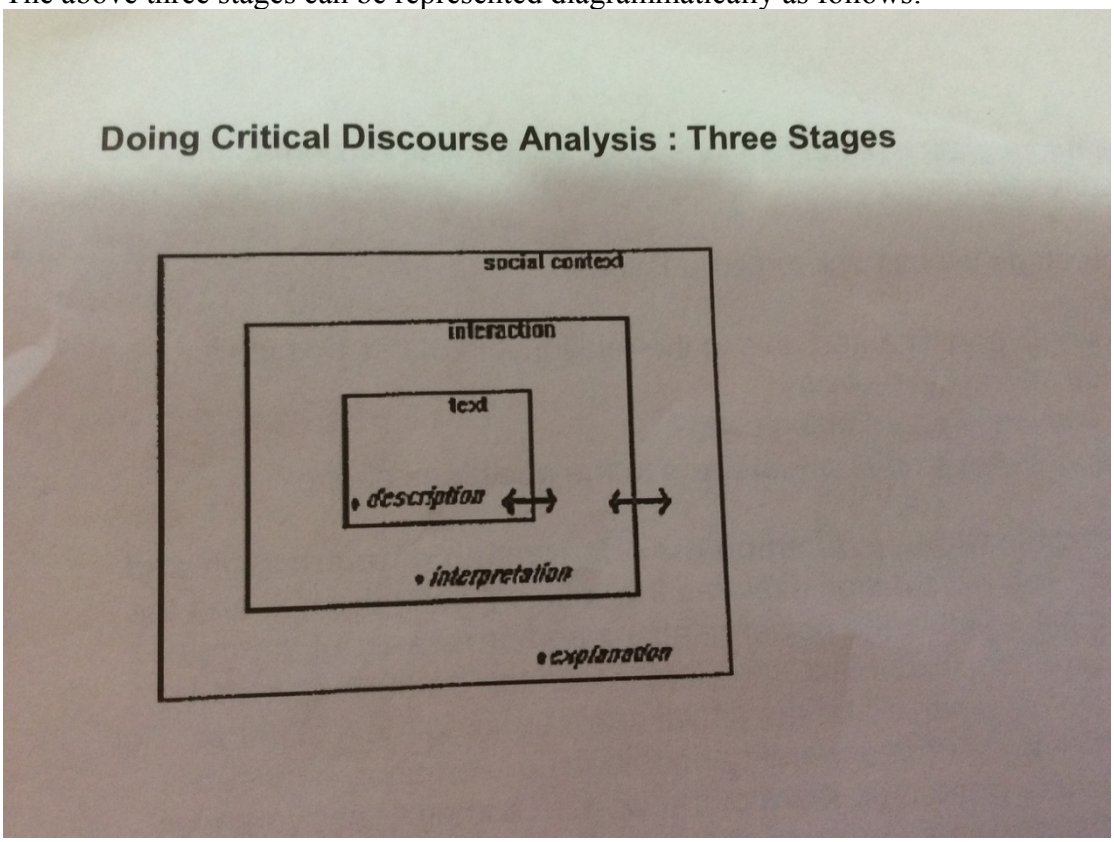
- Who put the message together and why?
- Is it positive or negative message about people?
- What might be the reaction of the public to the message of the communication? What might be the reaction of the people who are the objects of the message?

Another important way of making sense of the text is to think about any *metaphors* it conveys. For example, a common metaphor used in texts about welfare recipients is to represent them as lazy and unwilling to help themselves – visually they might be pictured as overweight, sitting and watching television. In this way the representation of *particular* people on welfare as scroungers, as the undeserving poor, reinforces a negative interpretation of what *all* people on welfare are like.

The process can move between the different stages of the decoding as participants reinterpret the significance of the text in the context of the discussion. It can also lead to different types of activities from this process of critical reading: for example, research activity to find out more about the 'subjects' of the message. Decoding a text depicting homeless people as making a 'lifestyle' choice can involve speaking first hand to homeless people about their experiences as well as researching evidence about the degree of homelessness amongst different groups of people and why it exists. There are also an increasing number of television programmes about people as 'benefit cheats' or what is sometimes called 'poverty porn', as poor people are focussed upon as objects of contempt and scorn. Clips from television programmes

such as 'Benefit Street' can provide ample textual examples for this type of analysis. A simple google search for 'benefit cheats' will generate numerous newspaper stereotypes of people on benefits who are implicitly or, at times explicitly, depicted as representative of people in receipt of welfare.

The above three stages can be represented diagrammatically as follows:



Taking action

CDA can also lead to action, as participants think about the consequences of the message and what they might do to counteract negative messages which depict people unfairly. This might involve creating a counter-representation, which more closely responds to the reality of people's lives. For example, creating a poster, picture, image, banner or audio-visual message which is more sympathetic and provides a different way of decoding the message and analysing its causes. This might be displayed in public places or be used to organise a meeting to raise awareness of the issues involved.

Task: *Design a session on a theme you have selected. Identify a suitable text and then work through the three stages yourself by showing how you would respond to the description, interpretation and analysis of the text. What kind of action do you think might be possible as a consequence?*

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