Book review: Applied Discourse Analysis: Social and Psychological Interventions

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WILLIG, Carla (1999)

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The book is one of a three part series which aim to deal with a ‘social constructionist’ perspective, which seems to be a kind of re-working of discourse analysis through cultural studies and psychology, with the ultimate aim of making sense of social action and experience. As the only compilation/reader in the series the quality is variable, but in order to maximise the book’s usefulness each chapter is organised around a particular textual site. So that if it were to be used as an introductory reader in a cultural studies, media studies, communications or broad-based journalism course, staff and students would not have to work their way through it, but could pick textual sites which coincided with their interests.

Perhaps the best way to make sense of this point – and to maximise the usefulness of this review - is to list those sites. They are interviews, letters, fiction, (children’s) lessons, comics, advertising, television, film, cities, organisations, gardens, sign language, bodies, ethnography, silence and (social) action.

I found I had a kind of sine-wave pattern of interest, starting from a low point, reaching a high around television, film, cities and organisations and then tailing off towards the end. I guess such an interest pattern is as much the problem of the reader as the text, but my interest was really only sparked when I thought something was being added to existing knowledge. Put together by a group of teachers at the Bolton Institute, in broad terms the book is aimed at undergraduates, and clearly has its heritage as a course reader. The book’s overall contribution is to extend the focus of discourse analysis which normally looks at writing, by rendering a range of social texts into written texts. At the same time, this eclectic range of situations the book deals with suggests it is also aimed at introducing discourse analysis in broad terms to the social and behavioural sciences. For those with a cultural studies background it’s not a particularly new technique. What is new is the range of situations included for analysis.

I think the high point was the chapter on organisations by Heather Hopfl, professor of organizational psychology at the Bolton Institute. It’s a high point because Professor Hopfl opens her chapter (Sub-titled ‘Breaking the body of the text’) by suggesting
she will employ Derrida and Kristeva to produce a kind of subversion of management approaches to organizational theory. In short, she draws a parallel between the ordered organization and Kristeva’s unified subject. Both are constituted through a kind of ‘syntax’ which can only be disrupted through the ‘poetic’, or the making strange of the familiar. She mounts a complex argument which suggests that till now organizations have used ‘the poetic’ in the service of productivity.

But this apparently outrageous approach to management thinking raises an interesting question. While Kristeva is interested in subverting ‘the phallocentrism of the Cartesian logos’ what is it about organizations that need similar assaults? Hopfl’s answer is swift. Positioning herself as anti-organisation theorist she says: ‘By giving attention to the human aspects of organisations, anti-organisation theorists privilege the individual over the reified notion of the organisation as a purposive entity’ (p.137).

Well, there goes your productivity.

Okay, but if management’s deployment of ‘the poetic’ is tied to the productivity of the ‘purposive entity’ how will it be better served by an attention to individual needs, and a poetics which subverts its culture? She admits that for functionalists and other business school types, application of Kristeva’s ideas on ‘love and practice would be laughable unless it were possible in some way to incorporate them into a human resource strategy’ (p.137). That incorporation, she argues, comes about through dialogue being opened up – prising open the management assumptions about ‘all for one and one for all’ approaches which deny individuality. Or, to adopt Hopfl’s terminology: ‘to open up the difference between the language of the organisation and the language of experience’ (p.138).

The piece is at times somewhat clumsy in its lack of a vernacular to describe its argument. And ultimately the question of productivity isn’t answered, but the experience of reading, with an amused ear cocked for howls of outrage from management types, is rewarding.

The piece on television by Helen Russell starts in a fairly elementary way – deploying Fiske, Hartley and Barthes over the semiotics of television, but by the second half of the chapter moves into various systems of reading. After a useful and brief tour of content analysis, the second part of the chapter moves beyond the rough-cut utility of quantitative approaches to media content to qualitative evaluations which make links between mediated images and social formations. In short, ideology. It’s all familiar, but for a set of undergraduates who constitute the target it may be useful in expanding the range of sites they would consider cultural (rather than just media) texts.
Finally a word on the Bolton Discourse Network. Unless I missed it the book is somewhat coy about what the network is. Perusal of the website would suggest it’s part of the Bolton Institute which is not a university, but is in the process of becoming one. The network comes out of a centre which connects the Institute to two other universities. Well, that’s not very straightforward, but the book is imprinted by the Open University Press, although it’s not clear whether that’s a purely publishing relationship or whether the book is set on any of the OU courses.

In its own words, the centre is involved in both teaching and research, supporting a variety of qualitative and theoretical research projects contributing to the development of discourse theory in psychology, with the term ‘discourse’ used primarily in its critical Foucauldian and hermeneutic senses to include inquiries influenced by feminism and psychoanalysis. The centre functions: (i) as a teaching resource base for qualitative and feminist work; (ii) as a support unit for the (re)production of radical academic theory; and (iii) as a networking centre for the development of critical perspectives in psychology.

I thought the book revealed as much about the centre as it opened up new textual sites to familiar approaches. The spread was difficult to deal with in a single review.