Beware of the Web

Thao Lê and Quynh Lê

Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Australia

T.Le@utas.edu.au

University Department of Rural Health, University of Tasmania, Australia

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Abstract: The contribution of the Web to society and education, particularly its contribution to on-line teaching and learning, are often discussed. Its usefulness, impact and power have been recognised. How neutral is the Web? Is the Web value-free from an ideology-loaded discourse? Questions such as these need to be addressed if we wish to take Web-based education seriously. The discussion examines some concepts and issues in Critical Discourse Analysis and relate them to the positive and negative influences that the Web can exert in education and intercultural interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Beware of the wolf! This popular message in fairy tales and fables for young children reminds children of dangers that a wolf can cause. Though the image of a bad wolf is no longer relevant, there are many dangers we need to be aware of with the permeation of computer technology in society. The Web is a fascinating phenomenon in terms of social impact. It has shortened space and time and has brought different peoples and cultures together in a virtual reality as well as in the real world. As the Web cannot be divorced from its social context, one cannot just evaluate the role of the Web entirely in terms of computer technology. The Web and its impacts in society and culture should be critically examined. This is where Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) could provide some insights.

2. THE WEB IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

What is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)? According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), the following key ideas are dealt with in CDA.

- CDA addresses social problems
- Power relations are discursive
- Discourse Constitutes Society and Culture
- Discourse does ideological work
- Discourse is historical
- The link between text and society is mediated
- Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
- Discourse is a form of social action.

CDA is concerned with social power, which is normally manifested in terms of social control of groups or institutions. This ability presupposes a power base of (privileged access to) scarce social resources, such as force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information, 'culture' or various forms of public discourse and communication. In any social discourse, one can find mixture of enthusiasm, desperation, information, misinformation, use, abuse, advertisement and propaganda; our existence can be enhanced or threatened by different paradigms. We are consciously or unconsciously participants in a discourse which cannot be value-free, being a family, university, health organisation or member of a small remote and isolated village. Some people are victims or fortunate inheritors due to the discourse in which they are brought up and become discourse members. Concepts such as revolution, paradigm, enlightenment, and empowerment are often used to describe the changes from one system into another. Paradigm shift refers to a meaningful change from one alternative to another. The Web could be a tool or a force which creates a paradigm shift. Thus, the Web is seen by many as a powerful tool for teaching and learning.

How innocent is the Web, ideologically? Is the Web value-free from an ideology-loaded discourse? The answer could be 'no' or 'yes', or a mixture of both. Many of us would agree that the Web is only a tool. It is a physical entity, which is subjected to good use or abuse by human beings. Simply, the Web is morally innocent and ideologically neutral. However, the Web is a product of a system or regime, which cannot be divorced from its historical background and functioning. It is 'there' for a social function. It was invented and has been maintained by a professional group or elite for serving their growing needs and reinforcing their images and metaphors of their worldviews. The Web is 'there' because it serves a purpose such as supporting an enterprise or maintaining a system. It carries social norms, expectations and exerts some impacts socially and culturally on the Web discourse, locally and internationally.

Recently, Critical Discourse Analysis has emerged to argue strongly that a discourse can enhance some people and discriminate against others. CDA is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. Thus, CDA advocates take explicit position, and want to understand, expose and ultimately to resist social inequality. The Web is not seen by them as 'innocent'. Its role in a Web discourse is closely tied to a social discourse within a culture or inter-culturally. The concept of emancipation is fundamental to CDA, particularly when one considers the kind of society in which great social imbalance exists: the ruling class, the elite, the oppressor, the powerful and the underdog, the oppressed, the disadvantaged. The three terms 'emancipation, enlightenment and empowerment' are used frequently in CDA to examine critically the power relationship among discourse members.

It is normally accepted that the power of the Internet has increased so rapidly. It is powerful as it can perform huge tasks with its speed. The newly introduced prefix e- such as e-mail, e-commerce, e-trade, e-banking shows clearly the impact of the Internet in modern society. It empowers many institutions to revolutionise their old practices. The Internet and globalisation walk merrily together. However, this is not the way emancipation is perceived from the CDA perspective. It can be seen in terms of disempowerment as the Internet could signal a division between the e-people and those who cannot afford the Internet or those whose culture does not accept or worship the virtual reality. When a highway runs across a village, its culture and environment are no longer the same. Metaphorically, this could apply well to the Internet as a superhighway.

Indoctrination is to fill in the mind of someone with particular ideas or beliefs with uncritical acceptance. It is not always easy to draw a line between indoctrination and education. In a dictatorship country, education is in essence indoctrination as learners are presented with knowledge from only one perspective that is expected to be accepted as 'universal truth'. In a meaningful learning discourse, academic slavery is a hindrance to intellectual development as it reinforces a closed mind rather than an open mind. However, can education be free from coercion and indoctrination?

The challenge by Critical Discourse Analysis to the educational establishment is important for educators because it raises crucial questions regarding certain hegemonic aspects of modernism and by implication how these have affected the meaning and dynamics of present-day teaching and learning. Education is not the process of acquiring new knowledge but fundamentally to make sense of knowledge and even to challenge it. CDA advocates encourage learners to question how the master narratives become constructed and how they influence their views and living experiences. In addition, the regime of knowledge should be challenged as it is 'there' in the

curriculum because it is part of power. Power, content, expression and knowledge cannot be easily separated in an educational discourse, as social structures and processes are organised through institutions and practices such as the law, the political system, the church, the family, the education system and the media, each of which is located in and structured by a particular discursive field. Discursive fields consist of competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organising social institutions and processes. They offer the individual a range of modes of subjectivity. Within a discursive field, for instance, that of law or the family, not all discourses will carry equal weight or power. Some will account for and justify the appropriateness of the status quo. Others will give rise to challenge to existing practices from within or will contest the very basis of current organisation and the selective interests which it represents. Education is about the learners and their internal and external worlds. If education is liberating the learners from fear and dogmatism, the notion of power can be seen as against education. Power is therefore important in conditioning and training because in conditioning and training there is a hierarchy of power relationship between the teacher and the learner. It is fair to say that there has been good progress in changing the power relationship between teachers and learners in education. For example, teaching is no longer passing knowledge from the teacher to the learner. In other words, the transmission model of learning in which teachers are the source of knowledge and learners are its receiver has been challenged by critical thinkers. Constructivism encourages learners to challenge knowledge and treat it as a means for the mind to explore not as the end of learning. Similarly, we have raised issues against establishments. The paradigm shift from instructivism to constructivism has become a great achievement from primary education to tertiary education. However, constructivism is not enough as the task of creating a critical discourse does not lie squarely with teachers and learners.

The Web has provided learners and teachers with an extremely powerful tool for sharing information in courseware. It also brings along problems in a human context. Like any discourses, one can question the value of globalisation of education in which the Web plays an important role. Perelman (1992) expressed a similar sentiment in his book with a provocative title *School's out: Hyperlearning, the new technology, and the end of education*. Postman (1995) demands redefining the value of school in a computer-based education. Clark takes a strong view against multimedia, arguing that media will never influence learning. Like face-to-face teaching, virtual classroom teaching in intercultural education needs to be culturally sensitive as it may create cultural conflicts between course designers, teachers and learners (Mester and Krumm 1999). Factors such as cultural stereotyping, cultural norms in social interaction, learning styles and cultural attitudes to education need to be taken into consideration. Otherwise the

superhighway can lead to educational conflict, particularly when the cultural gap between the educational provider and the receiver is very wide. The importance of personal knowledge of the people involved in any open, distance and flexible learning is sometimes lost in a context of 'globalisation' trends and a techno-idolatry often associated with it. And yet all education is a moral activity. It is concerned with people significantly affecting the lives of others and educators have a moral obligation to consider how their individual actions in the teaching/learning nexus might significantly affect the lives of those immersed in it (Davison 1997)

CDA takes seriously the notion of power, or abuse of power, in a discourse, whether it is a school, or a virtual reality environment. One would consider the ways in which Internet power could be abused to affect people's beliefs and actions in the interest of dominant groups, and against the best interests or the will of the others. The abuse can be in different forms such as promotion of violence and norm-violation that hurts others. In this way, dominance of the Web could lead to the illegitimate exercise of power. Recently, we have witnessed demonstrations against 'globalisation' associated with the power control of economic forces.

Different cultures see issues differently and people engage in discussing those issues are culturally constrained. In one culture, talking about sexual behaviour is encouraged in education while in other cultures it is censored or totally banned. A 'virtual classroom' in one cultural context may become a villainous classroom in another. There is a strong belief in Web-based education that teaching is not the process of acquiring new knowledge but fundamentally to make sense of knowledge and even to challenge it. Postmodernism encourages learners to question how the master narratives become constructed and how they influence their thinking and living experience. In addition the regime of knowledge should be challenged as it is 'there' in the curriculum because it is part of power. Social structures and processes are organised through institutions and practices such as the law, the political system, the church, the family, the education system and the media, each of which is located in and structured by a particular discursive field. If all those issues are ignored due to financially driven principles and pure excitement with the magic of the Web, the culturally ill-perceived educational superhighway could lead to ideology imposition and cultural conflicts. It is not always easy to draw a line between imperialism and education.

Due to the enormous popularity of the Web in general and educational Websites in particular, it is important to help students to make appropriate evaluation of the usefulness of the Websites that they encounter in their exploration of the virtual world. Criteria and guidelines based on educational philosophies and screen design principles should be introduced to assist students in their use of Websites. As the Web has gradually permeated

education at all levels, students particularly those in primary and secondary education, should be helped to be critical of the Web in their lives. Metaphorically, they should be aware of 'bad wolf' in the virtual reality.

3. CONCLUSION

Power is integrated in 'hegemony'. Class domination, sexism and racism are manifestations of such hegemony, in which the Web demonstrates its magical power. One should not treat the Web as a bad wolf whom we should avoid at any cost: it can be tamed. However, the Web should be closely watched as it can 'misbehave' when it travels across territories, carrying with it hidden traces of hegemony.

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BIOGRAPHY

Quynh Lê and Thao Lê have undertaken a number of research projects about courseware development, on-line teaching and evaluation of the role of the Web in education. They have developed courseware to support teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. They are the editors of the Internet Journal *Language, Society and Culture*.