

Researching study reforms and students

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects the methodology used in a research project on the consequences of the Bologna reforms. It starts with describing a shortcoming of discourse analysis, namely whether individuals act in the ways prescribed by discourses. By relating the results of the discourse analysis to the practice of actors, a way to overcome this flaw is suggested. In his research, the author has analyzed the consequences of the study reforms through students' accounts of their actions and experiences. The data has been gathered through the use of problem-centered interviews, an interactive interviewing method. Criteria for the selection of cases are discussed. The article closes by providing an example for a line of interpretation and by reflecting on the scope of the research results.

INTRODUCTION: ANALYZING THE CONSEQUENCES OF STUDY REFORMS

In German higher education research so far, scholars have chosen either an intentional or an interventionist view on the study reforms triggered by the Bologna Process. In the first case, scholars estimate whether reform policies will eventually reach their goals, for instance creating an European system of comparable and transferable degrees, or they assess modes of governance as they are established by political actors such as national governments (Witte 2006) or international organizations (Martens et al 2004).

In the second case, researchers are concerned with the implementation of the Bologna reforms and try to identify success factors and obstacles. Many of these studies are decidedly interventionist insofar as they are prescriptive, and focus on single reform policies, such as the implementation of a two-tiered study structure (Alesi et al 2005; Schwarz-Hahn/Rehburg 2003).

Naturally, studies of both kinds are also interested in the consequences of the Bologna reforms. But for estimating the consequences they rely on *a priori* standards, such as reform goals, implementation progress, or 'good governance'. In contrast, I take the consequences of study reforms as starting point. Thus, I am interested in political programs, reform techniques, and standards of 'good governance' only insofar as they are related to practical consequences.

ANALYZING THE REFORM DISCOURSE

My research is located in the field of political science and focuses on power relations manifest in social processes. In general, power relations characterize the interrelation

between governing and being governed (Foucault 1982). They operate with inclusion and exclusion: the study reforms are designed to solve problems in higher education, yet they favor certain ways of studying and exclude others. For analyzing this normative dimension I consider the Bologna Process to be part of a reform discourse. From this viewpoint, instead of being determined by rational actors or social structures, the reforms are shaped by discourses that comply with a specific set of rules. Truth is produced by conforming to these rules (Foucault 1974: 25). Discourse analysis accounts for these productive effects. The truth of the Bologna Process is produced by the dynamic interrelations between problems, policies and outcomes. The specific ways in which problems of study systems are framed are related reciprocally to specific policies intended to solve these problems. Together, problems and policies determine the perception of outcomes. The discourse analysis asks for the construction and legitimacy of problems, policies, and outcomes, and for effects of inclusion and exclusion. Table 1 summarizes the research questions for the discourse analysis of the Bologna Process.

	Problems	Policies	Outcomes
Construction	<p>What is considered to be problematic?</p> <p>How are problems framed?</p>	<p>How are policies linked to problems?</p> <p>What interventions are proposed?</p>	<p>Which outcomes are desired?</p> <p>What kind of causality between problems, policies and outcomes is assumed?</p>
Legitimacy	<p>Why is a social phenomenon a problem?</p>	<p>How are policies legitimized?</p>	<p>How is the success of policies measured?</p>
Inclusion/Exclusion	<p>Which problems are acknowledged and which are not?</p>	<p>What conceivable alternatives have been delegitimized?</p>	<p>How are unintended consequences accounted for?</p>

Table 1: Research questions: discourse analysis of the Bologna reforms

The discourse analysis focuses on the German study reform discourse. It starts by reconstructing how economic demands became legitimate goals of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s. It then traces the origins of major reform concepts like employability and key skills. Finally, the rationality underlying specific reform techniques – such as two-tiered study structures, credit point systems, modularization – is elaborated. Sources for the discourse analysis are texts and documents that reflect the variety of different ‘voices’: official declarations, progress reports, political programs, regulations and guidelines for implementing the reforms, statistical data on study systems, students, and labour markets,

prognoses, surveys, reports from model projects, public debates, and higher education research.

There is no agreed-upon methodology for discourse analysis (Flick 2002: 295). Rather, discourse analysis is a theoretical perspective on social phenomena that must be included as theoretical presupposition in the research design. Essentially, it involves a constructivist perspective on reality.

A frequent criticism of constructivist studies such as discourse analyses is that this theoretical perspective does not leave any room for judgement. Moreover, the identified constructs or discourses appear to be absolute and would exclude change or resistance.

Generally, questions of normativity are seldom addressed openly in constructivist studies. There are different positions on the epistemological status of the constructions research reveals. Hacking (1999: 39ff) suggests that these positions depend on the level of “constructivist engagement”, i.e. whether the revealed social constructions can and should be changed. At the lowest level of engagement, scholars just assert that far from being inevitable, a social phenomenon is the contingent result of historical processes. Medium constructivist engagement not only points to the contingency of a social phenomenon, but also denounces its negative consequences (with differing positions on the possibility of changing or reforming it). High constructivist engagement is convinced that we would be better off without a certain social phenomenon and calls for intervention.

As there seems to be unanimous consensus about the Bologna Process, high engagement would mean opposing the discourse that is the object of research. To make this opposition plausible, it must necessarily draw on alternative concepts. By delegitimizing the Bologna Process, it would fail in accounting for the productive effects of the Bologna Process and consider the study reforms as a question of normative choice.

Even if there were alternative concepts to appeal to, the Bologna Process is more complex than just being a matter of the ‘right’ concept or ideology. A low or medium engaged attempt to analyze the Bologna Process could be made by drawing on the governmentality concept. According to this perspective, power is effective in the relations between forms of governing and specific ways of thinking. It is manifest not only in disciplining subjects but also in the processes through which individuals define themselves, so-called technologies of the self (Foucault 1988). By analyzing normative claims to and the regulation of individual behaviour, governmentality studies show how individuals contribute to being governed (Lemke et al 2000).

Applied to the Bologna Process, the governmentality perspective reveals an economic rationality underlying key concepts such as employability. The subjects of the ‘Bologna world’ are supposed to act economically, i.e. to frame problems in terms of benefit cost analysis and to maximize individual value. Employability thus involves both regulative techniques (such as self assessment) and normative claims (such as regarding employment as individual responsibility). By revealing its underlying rationality, the false authority of employability is disclosed (far from being a self evident goal of higher education, employability furthers a set of regulative techniques and normative claims that frame

students as neoliberal subjects). Low constructivist engagement would simply state this as a fact, while the medium engaged would also argue against such concepts, but be pessimistic about viable alternatives.

Yet, discourses norm individuality but do not generate it (Hesse 2003: 302). Rather, individual actors attach meanings to their actions in their everyday practice. Just disclosing an economic rationality as governing the subjects of the ‘Bologna world’ begs the question of whether and how individuals really *act* in the prescribed manner. By remaining on the level of discourse, governmentality studies cannot account for the practical consequences of the Bologna reforms. Discourse is seen as more powerful than individual actions.

ANALYZING PRACTICE

My analysis, however, focuses on the practice of the primary subjects of the study reforms – the students. While discourse analysis reveals normative claims to the individual behaviour of students, I am interested in the different ways in which students’ actions match these claims. My theoretical assumption is that discourses do *not* determine the actions of actors, i.e. students. Rather, discourses are enacted in everyday practice. By appropriating the conditions for meaningful action, agents who merely function become actors who conform, enforce, ignore or oppose rules (Lüdtke 1994: 72).

In their practice students adapt to demands posed by the university, the labour market, and everyday life. They use opportunities for action differently, and may reproduce, modify, ignore or undermine demands. These differences are rooted in the students’ experiences, goals and values that frame their actions. Although every student’s practice is individual, it must not be completely consistent. Actions may have ambiguous meanings. Students can be at the same time dominated subjects and resisting actors. An analysis of the practice of students has to account for these multiple meanings, for the interrelations of autonomy and constraint (cf. *ibid.* 1991: 13f).

Practice is analyzed on the basis of problem-centred interviews with students. This type of semi-structured interview is

distinguished by a problem-centred orientation towards socially relevant problems which also characterizes the organization of processes of cognition and learning (preceding interpretation). The interviewer makes use of the formerly noted objective conditions of the observed orientations and actions in order to understand the interviewees’ explanations and continue the problem-centered questioning and re-questioning. ...Parallel to the production of broad and differentiated data material, the interviewer is already working on understanding the subjective view of the respondent while gradually making communication more precisely to address the research problem (Witzel 2000: 4).

From my research perspective, the normative demands identified by discourse analysis form the “objective conditions” for the interviews. They are integrated into the interview outline as well as into the interview itself. The interviewees:

are considered experts of their orientations and actions... They should become more confident in the course of the conversation to take at all times the liberty to correct their own statements or those of

their interviewees. In order to optimize progress in gaining insight, the interviewer combines listening and repeated questioning (ibid.: 13).

There has been profound scepticism against using interviews for discourse analysis because the interview situation would disturb an otherwise ‘naturally occurring’ discourse, and would flaw the interpretation. Rather, discourse analysis should focus on ordinary conversations (O’Rourke & Pitt 2007: 11ff). To be regarded as natural, data must pass the “dead social scientist’s test – would the data be the same, or be there at all, if the researcher got run over on the way to work?” (Potter 2002: 541). The notion of ‘naturally occurring’ data favours induction as the method of scientific interference. But to infer from empirical data the existence of a discourse requires theoretical assumptions – data collection is part of a deductive research design which involves formulating research questions and hypotheses, determining what kind of data is to be gathered (in most discourse analyses this is textual data), and developing general assumptions about the social phenomenon that is the object of research (for example, to regard it as determined by discourse). Considering all these presuppositions it is rather doubtful whether data on social phenomena such as discourses can be recognized as ‘naturally occurring’ at all.

Interviews contribute to the constructive task of research. They are not ‘naturally occurring’ conversations, but are constructed as part of the research design. They are a data-gathering method aimed at answering research questions. This ‘artificial’ status of the interview data is made explicit in many studies: by providing the interview outline and by giving background information on the interviewees. With this information the validity of the data can be estimated by the reader.

To dismiss the notion of ‘naturally occurring discourse’ means preferring an ‘interactive’ over a ‘dead’ social scientist strategy:

In analyzing the discourse of a particular information system, or a newspaper's front page, one sees the finished product of a particular discourse rather than its active construction. In researcher-involved interviews both the interviewee and interviewer are engaged in this active construction. ... There are preferred topics, roles and formats but these also develop and change in interaction (O’Rourke & Pitt 2007: 33).

In problem-centred interviews researcher involvement requires the stimulation of a certain discourse in order to elicit the (theoretically relevant) problems. Interaction is central for frequent stimulation during the interview: the interviewee may bring up new connections or shed another light on certain aspects which the interviewer has to integrate into the dialogue.

The interview outline I used allowed for topic selection and revision by both participants of the interview dialogue. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. They are structured roughly in three parts.

Process of studying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the reasons for you to study/this subject/at this university? • How was it for you to start studying at university? Do you remember your first week at university? • How did your studies commence? What were important events or key experiences?
Demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What demands are posed by your studies? What do you have to do to be a good student? • How do you cope with these demands? Are you able to meet them? Do you see any problems? • How do you organize your studies? Please give an account of a typical week. • If you think about your future career: what are necessary qualifications beyond studying? What do you do to meet such demands? • Have you completed any internships? What motivated you to do so? How have you organized your internships?
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you were to evaluate your studies so far: what would be on the positive, what on the negative side? • What does studying mean to you? Would you say that it is central in your daily life? • How is studying related to other activities? What is more important? Where do you see problems? • How are studying and other activities related to your leisure time and private life? Are there overlaps or conflicts? • If you think about the demands we have talked about: Are there limits to your qualification efforts? What would you refuse to do? • What does studying successfully mean to you? • Where do you see yourself in five years? • What needs to be improved at university?

Table 2: Outline for problem-centred interviews with students

The selection of interview candidates is not intended to be statistically representative. Rather, theoretical hypotheses guide the case selection. The purpose is not to produce a minimalized image of a population, but to account for theoretically relevant characteristics in case selection (Kelle/Kluge 1999: 53). Qualitative research on students in Germany is guided by theoretical assumptions. In most instances, the academic discipline (*Fachkultur*) is seen as decisive for students' learning processes and identity. In consequence, many studies compare students of two different disciplines that may reflect larger divisions (for example natural vs social sciences).

I follow a different line since I am interested in the consequences of general, not subject specific, study reforms. The most important criterion for the selection of interview partners then has been whether they study under reformed or traditional conditions. According to the logic of reform, studying under traditional conditions should be characterized by those problems that the reforms are supposed to overcome.

Yet, since discourses or structures do not determine the practice of individuals, the mode of study organization is not a sufficient criterion for case selection. On the basis of theoretical hypotheses, the cases are selected to allow for maximal structural variation (Kleining & Witt 2000: 10). To secure this variation in students' practices I have constructed two groups of interviewees that display 'extremely' different characteristics: The students of the first group are matriculated at German public universities in traditional degree structures (*Diplom/Magister*). Committed to academic freedom in the Humboldtian tradition, traditional structures allow for the individual organization of studies while students have to cope with the conditions of mass education. I have interviewed one male and four female students of this group, who were aged between 24 and 30 years and were majoring in a social sciences subject. At the time of the interviews, they had been matriculated between 10 and 17 semesters at Humboldt University Berlin, University of Leipzig, and Technical University Berlin.

The second group comprises students at two German private business schools with reformed degree structures (Bachelor). Their curriculum is organized tightly, and is committed explicitly to practical experience and career advancement. I have interviewed four male and two female students of this group, who were aged between 21 and 24 years and were majoring in a business studies subject. At the time of the interview, they had been matriculated between 4 and 8 semesters at the European Business School (ebs) in Oestrich-Winkel and at Otto Beisheim School of Management in Vallendar.

INTERPRETING ACTION

Qualitative social research is committed to interpretation: "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973: 5). In contrast to ethnography, my object of study is the significance of a political project, the Bologna Process. In line with ethnography, I consider "the insider's viewpoint [as] critical in understanding, defining, and evaluating a problem" (Tierney 1985: 99). I therefore analyze the meaning of the study reforms through students' accounts of their actions and experiences.

The interview material is coded according to the results of the discourse analysis, i.e. the students' accounts are related directly to normative demands and regulative techniques. Ultimately, the study reforms seek to change students' behaviour. Making plausible connections between discourse and practice is the central task of interpretation. As an example for a line of interpretation, I summarize some findings on employability in the following section.

Employability is a concept that regards the individual effort as decisive for being employed (Blancke et al 2000). It calls for self regulating practices to enhance chances for employment (Voß & Pongratz 1998). As a goal of higher education, employability presupposes that a university degree alone is not sufficient for gaining employment. In a globalizing world, employers supposedly look for “a degree, plus extras” (Yorke 2006: 6) when recruiting graduates. The students are seen as responsible to take care of these ‘extras’, for example by acquiring key skills, gaining practical experiences, and studying abroad. Employability requires students to anticipate their prospective employers’ demands and to meet these demands in advance.

Do students practice self regulation? What strategies do students use and what do they regard as decisive for success on the labour market? Asked for strategies to improve their chances for employment, the interviewees named internships, foreign languages, practical experience, or studying abroad. This range could also have been reflected in a standardized questionnaire, and is indeed used in the official German student survey (Bargel et al 2005: 15).¹ Yet, accounting for the distribution of strategies leaves open whether these strategies are used for self regulatory purposes.

The interviewees regard these strategies as important, but not as decisive for securing employment opportunities. Rather, they see themselves as competing with their fellow students for jobs and as having to learn how to prevail.

Under the conditions of mass education at German public universities, the interviewees face a vast university bureaucracy that in many cases hampers the realization of study abroad trips, the change of study programs or place of study, the completion of exams, the application for scholarships and public support schemes etc. Having overcome such obstacles, Anne, 11th semester student at Humboldt University, summarizes: *“What you learn absolutely is to organize yourself – against all the resistance!”* Overcoming resistance strengthens feelings of self efficacy (Bandura 1997) which is precisely the kind of ‘skill’ demanded by the labour market. *“In the end it leads to key skills when I learn how to come through”* concludes Heike, 12th semester student at University of Leipzig. From this view, mastering challenges posed by mass education qualifies for the labour market.

At the two business schools, permanent assessment imposes a system of tight control on the students’ study behaviour. The students have to learn to live by a tight schedule and to develop strategies for studying efficiently. For Markus, 6th semester student at Ottos Beisheim School of Management, studying under such conditions means being subject to a selection process: *“If you survive this then at least you know what suffering means, and the corporations will look for you.”* The interviews show that studying at these business schools means transcending the limits of everyday practice. The students should be showing a willingness to perform, being motivated and ready to work overtime.

Both groups of students share a basic interpretation of their higher education experience: to study means to survive. If students withstand the adversities of mass education they acquire key skills. Higher education then becomes an empowerment program that does nothing to alter deficient study conditions but fosters the development of skills necessary to cope with deficiencies. Similarly, the students who get through the business schools are steeled for

competition: they have learned to master stressful situations created by ever present time pressure. In both instances, survival qualifies for the job market. Yet to survive requires different strategies.

“What you definitely have to learn is to ignore rules, for example the study guidelines. If it is defined that a seminar can only be counted for Political Theory, you have to know that you only have to be firm about it and you will have it recognized for German Government. And a special appearance and audacity. For instance, to ignore office hours. I mean in a certain way so that you may also communicate via email or negotiate an extra appointment” (Heike, 12th semester student at University of Leipzig).

In traditional degree structures it is indeed possible for students to exert influence on their study environment. They learn how to handle rules flexibly and how to shape their relation to university with regard to their individual interests. As the interviews with students at public universities show, coming to terms with informal rules and demands – the “hidden curriculum” (Snyder 1971) – is pivotal for their learning experiences, skills development and the successful completion of their studies.

“I have always paid attention to not choose my courses only according to my interests, but with a view to the professors. There are professors where you get good grades, and there are those where you get poor grades. And another point: how the exams are scheduled. I do not choose five courses where the exams are all scheduled in one week. I have always taken care that I would have one or two exams the week. But then again you have lots of courses and you follow your daily routine: you visit the courses, read for the exams and then take the exams” (Johannes, 8th semester student at European Business School).

At the business schools, the students also encounter a hidden curriculum, but see no flexibility in dealing with it. Rather, their everyday practice is characterized by strategic behaviour. Exam and time management interfere with study interests, and strategies are aimed at maximizing individual returns. This requires the development of ‘leadership skills’: decision making, priority setting, assertiveness, negotiating skills. The interviewees perceive no alternatives to this form of education, since they consider it as necessary preparation for elite positions.

To sum up, there is evidence of self-regulating practices in the interview material. This self regulation is necessitated by the study environment, not by demands of a distant labour market. It is construed as a form of behaviour that helps to prevail in competition. Nonetheless, there is a profound difference for the students’ practice: whereas the hidden curriculum is under traditional conditions hidden to be revealed – and this revelation is central for student persistence – the hidden curriculum at the two business schools is “intentionally hidden in plain sight, precisely so that it will remain undetected” (Margolis et al 2001: 2). These students knowingly subject themselves to the hidden curriculum of a prospective leadership community. With regard to student persistence, the data points to two mutually exclusive practices: one necessarily involving reflective practice to disclose the hidden curriculum, the other excluding reflection of the hidden curriculum, allowing the students to embrace their ‘education’.

CONCLUSION

My research design is an attempt to relate the macro dimension of the study reforms to the micro level of students' practice. By concentrating on the individual conditions for meaningful action continuity and change in students' strategies come into view that otherwise may be obstructed by being preoccupied with discourses or social structures.

It goes without saying that the results of my research are explorative: only a limited set of actions and problems has been analyzed. Further research with different student populations is needed to validate the findings. Moreover, the Bologna reforms have also consequences for other groups at university. For example, the reforms require a new practice of teaching: in modules, with credit points, and focused on learning outcomes. Future research should account for different impacts of the Bologna reforms on different actors at university.

Finally, although the Bologna Process is a common European endeavour, the European dimension of the reforms is seldom addressed in contemporary research. While the Bologna Process may have triggered national reforms, it remains an open question for further research whether these changes will eventually lead to European harmonization. This research has to be comparative, since given the prevalent plurality of national higher education systems in Europe, a hypothesis-generating 'crucial case' (Lijphart 1971: 692) is not at hand. However, accounting for the specific conditions and traditions of national higher education systems may result in overestimating differences. Comparative research on the consequences of the Bologna Process should therefore begin with the actions of those who are affected by the reforms; students, teachers, and administration alike. What may appear at first sight as difference in structure could in fact coincide with similarity in practice, and vice versa.

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¹ Supported by the federal ministry of education and research, the student survey has been conducted since the 1980s. 9.975 students responded in its latest version (Bargel et al 2005: 3).