The Informing Nature of Talk & Text: Discourse Analysis as a Research Approach in Information Science

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ABSTRACT
In Information Science (IS), as well as other disciplines, discourse analysis has been used to extend the range of contextual data gathered using other research approaches. This form of textual analysis can enrich our understanding of complex information practices and contexts, particularly in relation to the ways that society and individuals construct understandings of various phenomena. However, not all discourse analysis approaches are the same; linguistic, Foucauldian, and psycho-social discourse analysis practices vary in their intent and their application. This panel will provide an overview of the discourse analysis methodology, including how the approach is conducted in various disciplines. By focusing on three projects by IS scholars that use discourse analysis, the range of data collection and analysis possibilities – including benefits and limitations of the approach – will be explored. The panel will also discuss how discourse analysis can be used in mixed methods studies, or with research participants engaged in other methods, to extend the research knowledge in the discipline.

Keywords
Research methods, discourse analysis, information behavior

INTRODUCTION
Established in linguistics and developed in disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, psychology, and education, discourse analysis provides an array of methods to examine the use of language and its role in social life (Potter, 2008). What constitutes discourse analysis varies according to disciplinary tradition; however, the object of all discourse analysis is language in the form it takes (e.g., spoken word, written texts, semiotic signs), though the analysis may take place at different levels (e.g., words, sentences, conversation turns, patterns). Rather than viewing language as an uncomplicated delivery device for meaning, discourse analysis views language as constitutive, – “the site where meanings are created or changed” (Taylor, 2001, p. 6).

Many discourse analysis-based research approaches focus on language-in-use and the social construction of meaning (Wetherell, 2001). Some approaches, such as conversation analysis, focus on talk and interaction as a social institution (Heritage, 2001). These approaches tend to focus on the performance and descriptive aspects of discourse. Other approaches, such as critical discourse analysis, focus on how knowledge is produced through discourses. The primary difference between these approaches is how the concept of discourse is understood. Approaches that focus on the performative and descriptive nature of discourses, for instance, understand discourse to be a social action. People draw on discourses to organize their social behaviours, construct meaning, and represent themselves to others. Critical discourse analysis approaches, in contrast, understand discourses to be structures that “enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 353). The focus of critical discourse analysis approaches, therefore, is on how social structures are enacted, reproduced and resisted. The value of these approaches to discourse analysis is that they allow for an examination of social interaction, sense-making and social relations.

DISCOURSE IN INFORMATION SCIENCE
As an approach to studying social practices and interactions, discourse analysis allows information scientists to examine information problems as social problems. Through a discursive lens, for example, information seeking is understood to be socially negotiated and constructed information practices people employ (Mackenzie, 2004; Johannisson & Sundin, 2007). The focus of discursively-informed information seeking research, therefore, is on how people make meaning as they search for information, not on the specific behaviours they exhibit during the seeking process. In addition, discursive approaches can expose how IS researchers and practitioners conceive of specific user groups, such as mature students (Given, 2002), information organizations (Radford, 1992), and disciplinary authority (Olsson, 2005a; 2005b; 2007). Discourse analysis approaches in IS lend themselves to projects exploring how people make sense of their information practices, examining the socially constructed understandings of information, information organizations, and information technologies, and applying these insights to improving the design of information technologies, search interfaces, and information services.

The purpose of this panel is to examine discourse analysis as a method for exploring multifaceted research problems.
and contexts in LIS. To achieve this purpose, three research projects will be used as illustrations to discuss approaches to discourse analysis, reasons for choosing this method, how the methods were carried out, and what this method contributed to the research. In addition to reviewing specifics of the method and providing examples, a broader discussion will be encouraged amongst panel attendees about the potential useful of discourse analysis and how it might contribute to LIS research.

**PANEL PROPOSAL**

In this panel, we will focus on strategies for using discourse analysis to demonstrate the ways in which they can:

- Extend and enhance the use of other, empirical research methods; and,
- Enrich our understanding of information practices and the social construction of knowledge.

To accomplish this, we will provide an interdisciplinary overview of discourse analysis, including examples from IS research that have employed this approach. We will also involve audience members in an interactive discussion by presenting IS research scenarios and asking audience members to envision how discourse analysis may be useful to examine with specific topics, including future research avenues and applications in IS.

**PANELISTS**

Each panelist contributes unique insights to the proposed panel discussion, based on their use of discourse analysis in various IS topic areas.

**Lisa M. Given** is a Professor of Information Studies in the School of Information Studies and a member of the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education at Charles Sturt University. She serves on the College of the Australian Research Council and is an Adjunct Professor in Humanities Computing and Education at University of Alberta. A former Director of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology, Lisa has received numerous research grants and awards and has published widely on topics related to individuals’ information behaviours and qualitative inquiry. Lisa is Editor of the 2-volume set, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (2008), which includes numerous entries on discourse analysis and other textual research approaches. Lisa has used discourse analysis in her studies of undergraduate students’ experiences on the university campus, where she explored the social construction of student identities (Given 2002), as well as the construction of pharmacists’ roles as prescribers (Schindel & Given 2013). By combining discourse analysis with qualitative interviews, participants can explore the influence of social constructs of reality within their personal experiences of particular phenomena. Many of Lisa’s PhD students have used discourse analysis in their doctoral work, across various contexts. In addition, Lisa teaches a regular workshop (“Introduction to Discourse Analysis”) as part of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology’s *Thinking Qualitatively* workshop series. This session has been attended by individuals across disciplines, including information science, nursing, education, human ecology, and other disciplines, with attendees drawn from universities and practice contexts worldwide.

**Deborah Hicks** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Hicks is currently using Potter and Wetherell’s (1987, 1996) approach to discourse analysis to study the discourses that librarians use to construct and describe their professional identities. The intent of this approach to discourse analysis is to discern the contextual consistency of accounts, described by Potter and Wetherell as interpretive repertoires. Identity can be exposed by studying the interpretive repertoires librarians draw upon when they speak about their profession. Repertoires are linked to social groups, such as professions, and are based on the socially, culturally, and historically located and contextualized practices of these groups. Practices are more than just activities performed by professionals; they provide meaning and intention that guide the activities of practitioners (Kemmis, 2010). When language is examined for its interpretive repertoires, it is examined for its functions – both intended and unintended. Therefore, professional identity is more than simply a description of the self with specific practices – it also serves a purpose, or function, and has different social consequences and implications as a result.

In this panel, Hicks will share her recent work that explored the full range of interpretive repertoires employed by librarians when they construct their professional identities. By focusing on the discourses librarians use when describing librarians, librarianship, and professionalism, Hicks’s study was able to determine that librarians emphasize what it is they do: they educate, organize, and serve the information needs of their communities. They are experts who solve problems and understand their clients’ information needs better than their own clients do. The emphasizing of skills and expertise functions as a way to highlight the value of information professionals to others (for instance, clients and other professions), while confirming that their work has value to themselves. Discursively, this articulated identity of librarians serves to unite the profession, often in opposition to various user groups (such as faculty members), other information providers (Google or library vendors), and other professionals. The identity transcends other non-professional identities, such as one’s gender or race, and provides a common ground for all professionals regardless of the information environment in which they work.

**Theresa J. Schindel** is a doctoral candidate in an interdisciplinary program with the Department of Educational Policy Studies and the School of Library and
Information Studies at the University of Alberta. She is also Clinical Associate Professor, Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of Alberta. Building on her background in pharmacy practice and professional education, her research interests focus on information behaviour in the context of professional learning, practice, and change. Following legislated changes in the province of Alberta in Canada permitting pharmacists to prescribe medications, Schindel has pursued her interest in professional and societal views of pharmacists in prescribing roles (Hughes, et al., 2013; Schindel & Given, 2013). Schindel’s doctoral research explores how pharmacists make meaning of and enact their patient care roles as prescribers in the modern health care environment. This research merges analysis of professional prescribing documentation using a discourse analytic approach based on the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987) with analysis of interviews with pharmacist prescribers using a constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

In this panel, the discourse analysis approach used by Schindel and Given (2013) in their study of newspaper media coverage of pharmacist prescribing will be highlighted. In this study, the use of discourse analysis through the lens of social positioning theory permitted a multi-perspective view of pharmacist prescribing as a socially constructed phenomenon. The study’s findings highlight that newspaper texts portrayed different views of pharmacist prescribing from diverse audiences including pharmacists, pharmacy organizations, consumers, advocacy groups, physicians, and medical associations. Various views represented discourses and conflicting positions characterized as dualities in roles; for example, pharmacists as qualified to prescribe versus pharmacists as inadequately educated to prescribe. Discourse analysis permitted contemplation of “discourses as the primary context for information behaviour and knowledge organisation” and the expression of different versions of reality (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005, p. 92).

Rebekah Willson is a doctoral candidate in the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University. She is also an Assistant Professor in the Library at Mount Royal University. Her research is in the area of information practices during periods of transition. In particular, she is using a social constructionist lens to examine the information practices of new tenure-track faculty members as they transition from their doctoral studies to faculty positions. Transitions are procedures of creating new meaning and understanding. They are a convoluted process, requiring a redefinition of one’s sense of self after a disruptive life event (Kralik, Visentin, & van Loon, 2006), as well as of creating new information practices that must be reconciled with the old (Lloyd et al., 2013). Part of creating new information practices during a transition is to create meaning through locating oneself in the discourse of the new environment.

The research presented uses discourse analysis in two different ways. The first is to examine documents created by universities for use by doctoral students and new tenure-track faculty members to locate the discourses about topics such as roles, expectations, and preparation of these two groups. This examination speaks to a better understanding of the context in which these groups are situated. The second is to compare the discourses found within the publicly available documents created by universities to the discourses used by new faculty members to describe their transition experiences. New faculty members’ experiences were explored through multiple interviews and journals using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). As a method, discourse analysis can be used to better understand the larger context in which individuals find themselves, as well as how the individual uses language to create meaning and locate her/himself within a discourse.

STRUCTURE OF THE PANEL
The proposed structure of the panel is as follows:

- The Moderator (Lisa Given) will introduce the panel and provide an overview of key trends in using discourse analysis, both within and outside of the discipline of IS (15 minutes);
- Each of the remaining panelists will provide an overview of the discourse analysis approach they are using or have used in their research projects. Each will focus on why this particular approach was chosen to investigate the topic of interest, including the benefits and limitations of using the approach to investigate information-related contexts (10 minutes each);
- The panelists will facilitate an interactive discussion and hands-on activity with the audience. In this portion of the panel, attendees will be given excerpts of various types of texts related to information science topics of interest, and asked to analyze these in small groups. The panelists will outline principles and practices of engaging in discourse analysis, so that each small group gets a feel for the way that the analysis is done. Following some time for the small group activity, the entire audience will reflect upon the value that discourse analysis techniques can bring to IS research, as well as any challenges identified in using the approach (30 minutes);
- The Moderator will close the session by reviewing methodological challenges and opportunities that emerge during the panelists’ presentations and discussion following the small group activities. The panel will also suggest avenues for future research in IS that can use discourse analysis (10 minutes).

CONCLUSION
Discourse analysis provides a lens through which to examine the complicated, negotiated, and contested use of language and what it attempts to accomplish, which is
necessary to understand what meaning events and experiences have for people in the social world. Used on its own or in concert with other methods for data triangulation, this more complex and nuanced understanding of meaning is what discourse analysis can contribute to the field of IS research, particularly to the understanding of the context in which individuals create meaning.

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