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A Discursive Framework for Examining ISD

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Abstract

The paper proposes a view of Information Systems Development (ISD) processes as discursive practices. A discursive ISD practice determines the production of representations and legitimation of meanings through business process models, information requirements specifications, database/knowledge base designs, procedures, rules, etc. – that reflect particular interests and power relations. The paper proposes a framework that makes particular distinctions among organisational ISD discourses: first, between the 'consensus' and 'dissensus' organisational discourse (Deetz 1996a); and second, between the 'system' and 'lifeworld' IS discourse. By combining these two dimensions of contrast ('consensus—dissensus' and 'systems—lifeworld'), four distinct types of organisational ISD discursive practices are identified: Covert-Hegemonic, Hegemonic, Emancipatory and Participatory. The nature of the proposed ISD discursive types, the meaning of distinctions made, and the implications for IS practice and research, are discussed.

Keywords: Information Systems Development, ISD paradigms, ISD discursive practices, discursive framework

1. INTRODUCTION

The view that discourse is the foundation of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman 1966) and that organisations are discursively constructed (Alvesson & Karreman 2000) raises specific concerns about IS—organisation relationships. First, how organisational discourses influence and produce representations of reality in Information Systems Development (ISD) processes and thereby construct IS designs; and second, how discourses mediated or enabled by Information Systems (IS) in turn reconstruct actors and organisations. More specifically, this paper is concerned with how IS designs, like other artefacts and material objects, individual and collective identities, are produced by organisational discourses operating within specific societal contexts and power relationships. Of particular interest is how discursive practices determine the nature of ISD processes and bring particular IS designs ‘into being’. To address these concerns the paper explores different assumptions underlying ISD discourses and suggests a particular seeing of ISD that draws attention to ideology, power, and relations of domination that produce and legitimate meanings and shape representation of reality and specifications of IS.

Investigation of the assumptions underlying ISD processes, as Hirschheim and Klein (1989) convincingly argued, is essential for understanding different ISD approaches, methodologies and practices, the nature of developed systems as well as the resulting changes in organisational practices. In their landmark paper, Hirschheim and Klein (1989) proposed an ISD framework which identified functionalist, social relativist, radical structuralist and neo-humanist paradigms (based on Burrell and Morgan’s sociological paradigms, 1979). By adopting particular lines of distinction (objective vs. subjective; radical change vs. regulation), Hirschheim and Klein’s (1989) framework draws attention to epistemological influences on ISD in both practice and research.

Their epistemological paradigms played an extremely important role in the IS community by drawing our attention to the difference between the predominant functionalist approaches and emerging alternative interpretive and critical approaches (Hirschheim et al. 1995). Similar to other social sciences, however, the different paradigms are often seen as a basis for conflict and exclusion (paradigmatic incommensurability) despite the calls for pluralism and the use of multiple paradigms (Landry & Banville 1992; Mingers 2001). While defining important alternatives, the epistemological paradigms have also been used to constrain the debate and reify divisions (Deetz 1996a, 1996b). As ISD processes change and research agendas evolve, there is a need to explore new and more important dimensions of difference and new ways of seeing the ISD research domain.
The objective of this paper is to propose an alternative view of ISD processes as discursive organisational practices and discuss new insights into and distinctions among various ISD approaches identified by the framework. The proposed **discursive ISD framework** makes a distinction between: Covert-Hegemonic, Hegemonic, Emancipatory and Participatory ISD. Such a discursive framework is not intended as a replacement of the epistemological framework, but rather as a way of exposing some further interesting contrasts in contemporary ISD practices by focusing attention on the (re)production of meanings and legitimation of representations in ISD processes. It is intended to help us – IS researchers and practitioners – understand differences in ISD that matter but are hard to see. It is intended to make us more attentive to the ways particular values and interests become inscribed into the resulting IS designs.

### 2. ORGANISATIONAL DISCOURSES AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Following the ‘linguistic turn’ in social sciences (sociology in particular) scholars in organisation studies are increasingly paying attention to the discursive influences on and of organisations. Organisations are conceptualised as discursively constructed collections of texts (Alvesson & Karreman 2000; Keenoy et al. 2000; Hardy et al. 2000; Grant et al. 1997). Such a view emphasizes the ‘talked’ and the ‘textual’ nature of social interaction through which social reality is reproduced and organisations recreated. The key questions that such a view opens up are: How is this reality constructed and sustained? How are organisations (re)produced by historically situated discourses?

In answering these questions one cannot avoid the role of organisational communication and IS. Namely, any information system – be it a transaction based IS, MIS, DSS, executive IS, ERP or computer-mediated communication – is a system of texts, consisting of more or less structured data such as data sets in databases, models in DSS, or natural language messages in email or groupware interactions. In other words, as a system of texts an information system represents a form of organisational discourse, and thus a means of organising social reality. Like other discourses, information systems bring certain objects and concepts into being. An information system does not simply ‘mirror’ reality, translating, for instance, objects and their relationships into database structures. Rather, an IS (re)constructs objects, concepts and relationships, ‘identifies’ some phenomena and not others, institutes some rules and procedures, thereby implying certain views, values and norms (and disregarding others). Through their implementation and recurrent use IS become a powerful ordering force, a means for the production, distribution and consumption of organisational meanings. As discourses that (re)organise and (re)produce social texts by employing the mystique of ever more powerful Information and Communication Technologies, IS play an increasingly important role in the social (re)construction of reality.

From a discursive theory approach (Alvesson & Karreman 2000; Keenoy et al. 2000; Hardy et al. 2000; Grant et al. 1993, 1995), IS design can be seen as a site of ongoing discursive struggles through which organisational meanings are reconstructed, imposed, contested and negotiated. ISD processes can thus be conceptualised as discursive practices by different groups of actors who struggle to shape ‘presentations’ of reality in particular ways (frame problems and construct the future IS to resolve them), according to their views, interests and values, and thereby achieve certain political effects. What is particularly interesting is to understand how such discursive practices, that is, ISD processes, are ideologically shaped by the relations of power and dominant discourses.

Generally, in an ISD process we conduct requirements analysis: we talk to the users of the future IS and apply various methods and techniques to describe how business processes operate and how they can be changed and improved, e.g. made more efficient, productive, and reliable. We then model information flows and processes and define **information requirements**, which together with the model of business processes serve as specifications for the design of the envisaged IS. We use, for instance, entity-relationship diagrams to represent entities and their attributes, as well as how one type of entity is related to other types. In this way we claim to represent or map a relevant domain of ‘reality’ which is going to be served by the IS. In other words, we represent a reality and the desired content and functions of IS as a future part of this reality.

When we apply ISD methodologies we are primarily concerned with the correctness of representation, that is, how accurately entity-relationship models, and consequently database structures, map the ‘reality’. The ‘reality’ – processes, objects, their attributes and relationships – is assumed to exist and naturally occur. Thus our task in information modelling is to identify those processes, objects, their attributes and relationships and map them as accurately as possible (and practicable). We do realise that any modelling is accurate to the degree that it involves selection (of important from unimportant), abstraction (of some objects, attributes and relationships), and description (naming, documenting). But what we do not recognise is that by doing so – by selecting, abstracting and describing –
we project a particular way of seeing reality. And like all seeing, modelling is also seeing as (Deetz 2000); what one is modelling or what one is seeing as depends on values and preferences. As information modelling and requirements specification imply certain values and interests, the subsequent design of data structures, databases and programs necessarily implant these values and interests. Those in organisations that have the power and expertise to define the purpose, role and tasks of IS and specify information requirements have in fact the privilege of implanting into IS their seeing of reality, that is, their value-laden distinctions and models. In other words, their views, values and interest become inscribed into IS software design. As Bowker and Star (1994) wittily note:

'.. values, opinions, and rhetoric are frozen into codes, electronic thresholds and computer applications. … we can say that in many ways, software is frozen organisational discourse.' (p. 187; emphasis added).

What remains imperceptible in this process (one might say conveniently so) is that by naming entities and relationships found in the ‘reality’ we analyse, we participate in the act of (re)constituting these entities and relationships. By distinguishing some objects and labelling them as a particular class of entities and identifying some of their attributes as well as some of their relationships with other classes of objects, we participate in a more fundamental process of object constitution through language. We identify some objects, but not others. We specify some attributes but not others. We map some relationships but not others. While doing so we claim that they naturally ‘exist’ and therefore should be mapped. When ‘mapped’, these entities, attributes and relationships stand for the reality observed. As these maps become transformed into data structures and databases, and coded into application software, the represented (and reconstructed) reality is built into IS design (that is, frozen into codes and computer applications), and subsequently ‘made real’ through the system’s implementation and use.

Objects or phenomena (organisational units, costs, revenue, tasks, employees) in real life situations, however, can be seen (and constructed) in many different ways; events may be attributed different meanings depending on a point of view, value position and interests. When, for instance, in the case of a Decision Support System (DSS) development in a Government Department (Molineux 1998), employees’ time was defined as either ‘time devoted to client-related work’ or ‘other time’, initially it did not seem as something of concern – just a way of recording employees’ time. However, when the DSS developer collected and entered the employees’ time sheet data into the DSS, their work and their time have been represented as either client-related or other. An important part of their work, such as quality improvement, staff development and training, organising, and coordinating, was named as other. By making such a distinction, the DSS developer, in cooperation with managers, redefined employees’ work in a way that reflected managers’ seeing of employees as ‘providers of services to clients’. Employees, however, had no chance to put forward their own, alternative seeing of their work, as the distinction between client-related and other work was treated as natural and inevitable. Implemented in DSS, such a distinction reconstructed the meaning of employees’ work and affected the vision (model) of the future operations of the Department. Furthermore, the way reality was represented (reconstructed) in the DSS determined (limited) the options for the transformation of the Department.

By implanting the distinction between client-related or other work into the DSS model, managers inscribed their views and values into the system which subsequently served to justify decisions and change the reality (retrench staff and transform the Department). Alternative views of employees’ work by different stakeholders, would have produced alternative definitions of work types and times recorded in the DSS, and would therefore have enabled different (re)constructions of reality and opened other avenues for transforming the Department.

This example illustrates claims that ISD methodologies are based on the representational conception of language and that business process models, information requirements specification and database structures and programs are not simply ‘descriptions’ of the real world but serve to construct it. Consequently, the resulting IS cannot be understood as neutral and ‘objective representations’ of reality but instead value-laden and interest-based re-constructions. This leads us to some interesting questions: what is the nature of organisational ISD discourses that produce particular representations and how can these discourses be characterised?

3. THE DISCURSIVE ISD FRAMEWORK

To help us explore ISD discursive practices we focus attention on broader organisational discourses and orientation of IS practitioners and researchers. Differences among ISD discursive practices can be shown by contrasting two orthogonal dimensions: the ‘consensus—dissensus’ dimension and the ‘system—lifeworld’ dimension. The first ‘consensus—dissensus’ dimension – adopted from Deetz’s four discourses of organisational enquiry (1996a) – refers to the social context of ISD and the relations of ISD practices to the dominant discourses in an organisation and in the wider IS community. This dimension enables us to make a distinction between ISD practices that are compliant
with and embedded in dominant organisational discourses, existing social orders and power structures called ‘consensus’ discourses and those ISD practices that challenge the dominant discourses and disrupt existing social orders and power structures, called ‘dissensus’ discourses.

The other dimension proposed in this paper is the ‘system—lifeworld’ dimension concerned with the substantive and interventionist aspects of ISD in the functioning of organisations. Following Habermas’ (1987) system/lifeworld distinction, an organisation may be conceived as simultaneously a system and the socio-cultural lifeworld of its members (Ceecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2002). ISD practices in the system’s side of this dimension focus on the organisation’s material and intellectual production, its economic viability, administrative and management operations, information structures and databases, rules and regulations, and the like. It draws attention to ISD intervention into material and economic (systems’) side of organisations and emphasises resulting IS contribution to organisational performance, functionality, efficiency and effectiveness. The opposite, lifeworld, side of this dimension focuses on the symbolically created universe of daily social activities of organisational members, and the taken-for-granted, shared, background stock of knowledge, that involves vast and unexpressed sets of beliefs, convictions, tacit assumptions, and values. The lifeworld side draws attention to ISD intervention into lifeworld reproduction, and the resulting IS impact on social integration, cultural reproduction and socialisation of organisational members.

3.1 The consensus—dissensus dimension

This dimension draws attention to differences among ISD discourses in relation to the existing social order and power structure (see Table 1). On one hand, there are ISD processes that assume and seek ‘unity of interests’, order, regulation, and uniformity of views, which exemplify consensus discourses. On the other hand, ISD processes that assume ‘multiple and diverse interests’, variety of views, disorder and change, exemplify dissensus discourses. These differences are relevant for understanding how ISD processes are conducted to either support or undermine dominant discourses, existing social orders and power structures.

Table 1 Assumptions behind the Consensus—Dissensus ISD discourses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consensus discourse in ISD</th>
<th>Dissensus discourse in ISD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unity of interests, values and views</td>
<td>Multiple and diverse interests, values and views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegemonic order as natural and unproblematic</td>
<td>Conflicts, struggle and tension as a natural state and source of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressive social relations; Power as oppressive</td>
<td>Potentially liberating social relations; Power as productive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD methodology as means of objective, neutral and unambiguous representations of reality</td>
<td>ISD methodology as a medium for argumentation and struggle for meanings; information requirements resulting from meaning co-creation and negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information systems mirror reality and are value neutral</td>
<td>IS reflect the struggle among different discourses and are inscribed by certain values and interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD necessarily result from and are embedded in the dominant discourse (eg. managerialist, technocratic)</td>
<td>ISD are sites of resistance and opposition to existing orders aiming to disrupt dominant discourses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS researchers and developers as objective observers and neutral facilitators of reality mapping into IS</td>
<td>IS researchers and developers as historically and socially situated actors, positioned and active facilitators of change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The socio-cultural lifeworld is the symbolically created, taken-for-granted universe of daily social activities of organisational members, which involves language, social structures, and cultural tradition as the background knowledge that members share. While material production refers to the system aspect of an organisation, cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation refer to the lifeworld of its members (Habermas 1987).
The consensus side reflects the approach by those IS practitioners and researchers who take existing social order, rules and norms, and operations of power as given. Their aim is to explore (discover) the needs of key actors – the protagonists and guardians of the social order – and design an IS to meet these needs. When ‘engineering information requirements’ and designing IS to fulfil them, IS practitioners do not question for instance existing structures of domination, coercive use of power, or ‘natural’ orders nor do they challenge dominant discourses. They typically assume that the role of ISD methodology is to describe business processes and information requirements, name entities and their relationships and properly document these descriptions (using e.g. DFD diagrams or ER models). The proper use of ISD methodology is seen as a guarantee of an objective analysis and neutral and unambiguous representations of reality in IS structures. Consequently, IS developers and researchers, as objective observers, are primarily concerned with the accuracy and efficiency of representations.

The dissensus side emphasizes the opposite: inherent conflict and struggle and tension among different discourses in organisations that permeate ISD. ISD processes are seen as inevitably taking place within conflicting discourses and struggles, explicitly dealing with tendencies for domination by the most powerful. ISD practices and research can be conducted with more or less explicit intention to disrupt dominant discourses. The use of language and models in ISD methodologies is not considered a neutral and objective conduit of description of the ‘real world’. Rather, they are perceived as a medium for argumentation and struggle for legitimation of meanings. Instead of ‘mirror’ image, IS are understood as a way of seeing reality (a ‘lens’ metaphor). Consequently, ISD methodology, including various models (e.g. business processes, ER), is used to enable articulation of different views and multiple meanings and recreation of reality. IS developers and different user groups are seen as necessarily involved in negotiation of meanings and co-creation of inter-subjective meanings that might lead to partial resolution of conflicts. As it is assumed that conflicts and tensions are immanent in organisations, ISD processes need to provide a forum to deal with issues at hand and enable conflicting interests and values to be expressed and argued for. ISD aims to establish an open dialogue and assists the emergence of inter-subjectively created meanings, leading to negotiated representations and specifications of information and data structures in IS. It is important to note here that conflict resolution and negotiated meanings and representations are always partial, conditional and temporary. While dissensus is paramount, actors may arrive at a limited, conditional agreement regarding the content and operation of an IS. This does not preclude, of course, their future dissatisfaction with and resistance to the IS. At the dissensus side, IS researchers and developers are seen as historically and socially situated social actors who play a role in organisational discourses and meaning making through ISD. They are seen as active agents of change who are necessarily positioned.

3.2 The ‘system—lifeworld’ dimension

The ‘system—lifeworld’ dimension draws attention to differences regarding the nature of organisations and organisational processes as targets of ISD intervention (Table 2). While organisations may be understood as simultaneously systems and the socio-cultural lifeworld of its members, a particular ISD process may emphasise one view at the expense of the other. At the system’s side of this dimension are those ISD discourses that focus on the functioning of systems (such as production systems, financial systems, distribution systems, supply chain management, decision making processes) and seek improvements of systems’ functionality, efficiency and effectiveness. Such ISD processes are concerned with concrete facticities, for instance, physical artefacts (machinery, buildings, technology), resources allocations, production scheduling, business process integration, and achievement of organisational performance goals. As management is charged with responsibility to control the systems and achieve performance goals, IS practitioners and researchers often see IS as serving managers or other actors with formal status and responsibility to achieve the goals.

ISD as systems discourse is an arena of purposeful action and instrumental rationality: an IS is conceived as a means to achieve given ends. It is a realm where one speaks of hard facts – optimal plans, productivity, efficiency, service quality, delivery times, client-related times, and the like – leaving no space for ‘soft’ issues. The privileged language of functionality establishes a monopoly of facts. Consequently, IS discourses are assumed to produce correct representations of the ‘object world’: e.g. a model of business processes that consists of truth claims about this world. Furthermore, technical language of requirements engineering, database structures and design, network architectures, privileges IS developers and their claims to truth. More broadly speaking the application of IT in the business/management domain is considered an advancement of scientific-rational control. Similarly, ISD methodologies are seen as guided by pseudo-scientific principles.
Table 2 Assumptions behind the ‘system—lifeworld’ ISD discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systems discourse</th>
<th>Lifeworld discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The view of IS as instruments for improving functionality of the production, administrative, financial, management, and other systems</td>
<td>The view of IS as the social infrastructure of an organisation as community; IS as a medium for social interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of IS: serving management goals such as increasing productivity, efficiency, effectiveness, competitiveness, etc.</td>
<td>The role of IS: contributing to social goals, social integration and socialisation of individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD is an arena of purposeful action, self-interested calculus and instrumental rationality as a central concern</td>
<td>ISD is an arena of communicative action, cooperation and communicative rationality as a central concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD use a privileged language of systems (a fixed language game):</td>
<td>ISD as argumentation processes and communicative practices involving ‘multiple language games’ and emergent meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language of functionality, efficiency and effectiveness of processes establishing a monopoly of facts and</td>
<td>Communicative competence of actors of key importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Technical language of IT and ISD methodologies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ISD discourses produce ‘correct’ representations of systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD models involving truth statements</td>
<td>ISD models involving claims to truth, rightness/legitimacy and truthfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD methodologies guided by pseudo-scientific principles</td>
<td>ISD methodologies as social and cultural pursuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS ideal: an instrument of scientific-rational control</td>
<td>IS ideal: enabler of social change with emancipatory potential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alternatively, ISD discourses can be located in the lifeworld side of the ‘systems—lifeworld’ dimension. Such ISD discourses are grounded in an understanding of organisations as communities and focus on social interaction, cultural reproduction, and socialisation of members. IS are viewed as the social infrastructure of an organisation as community and as a medium for social interaction through which social reality is (re)constructed. The role of IS is conceived as contributing to shared social goals, social integration and socialisation of individuals. Similarly, ISD processes are considered as an arena of communicative action, cooperation and communicative rationality. Although the ISD lifeworld discourse may subsume systems aspects – they are also based on models, techniques and procedures for IS analysis and design – they tend to focus on social, historical and cultural contexts and understanding the meaning and impact of future IS within these contexts. In the lifeworld focused ISD discourse communicative competence of actors, both developers and users, is of key importance.

3.3 The Discursive ISD Framework
The two dimensions of contrast, ‘consensus—dissensus’ and ‘system—lifeworld’, produce the grid that divides the discursive field of ISD processes into four conceptually distinct domains, as presented in Figure 1. Each of these four domains identifies a type of ISD discursive practice. The four types of ISD discourses are proposed as ideal types in the Weberian sense. They are not meant to be rigidly demarcated but instead overlapping and blending into each other (hence dashed lines in Figure 1). As discursive practices in any ISD process are by their nature emergent, they may easily transform from one type to another.
Consensus ISD discourses (on the left hand side in Figure 1) are described as hegemonic since they (re)produce unity, order, and consent through domination. The hegemonic discourse is characterised by oppressive works of power and domination, and legitimised by the existing social order and power structures, taken as natural. The notion of hegemony, as defined by Gramsci (1986), denotes the ability of some groups, assumed to be naturally superior, to exercise power and control over other people. People are not physically “forced to concede power or control to another group, rather they believe that their own interests are best served by that other group being in power” (Tietze et al. 2003, p. 149). As Alvesson & Deetz (2000) explain “The hegemonic system works through pervading common sense and becoming part of the ordinary way of seeing the world, understanding one’s self, and experiencing needs” (p. 87). As a wilful consent to domination, hegemony in ISD can be achieved through different discursive practices. These practices range from the hegemonic ISD discourse, which is openly established and maintained through explicit systems concerns and managerial and technocratic ideology, to the covert hegemonic ISD discourse, established and maintained through hidden forms of domination by dominant groups pretending to be concerned with lifeworld issues of the dominated.

The hegemonic ISD discourse (consensus—system) is closely linked with the working of ideology: managerialist ideology, economic and technological rationalism. Through hegemonic ISD discourses organisational members are made to consent to the dominant view of systems (production, management, decision making) and systems performance goals as ultimate organisational goals. This implies a particular framing and interpretation of systems’ problems (productivity, efficiency, profitability, etc.) and information needs. To the extent that managerial and technocratic reasoning dominate, systems’ ‘optimal’ operation becomes the only rational way of thinking, thereby excluding any alternative as irrational. In such a way the hegemonic ISD discourse allows only a single view of information requirements and IS objectives (to achieve production, management and other systems’ objectives), thus presenting the resulting IS design as inevitable. This is reinforced by the use of an ISD methodology to prescribe the language of systems and performance in discussing and modelling business processes, and the language of objects,
attributes and relationships, in specifying information models and requirements. In such a way the ISD methodology both enables and restricts legitimate ‘language games’. As a consequence the participants, including those adversely affected by the future IS, have no option but to adopt and consent to dominant meanings if they want to take part in the ISD discourse.

The covert hegemonic ISD discourse (consensus—lifeworld) achieves the same outcomes through socio-cultural productions and socialisation. The covert form of hegemonic discourse is maintained by the much more subtle use of managerial and technocratic ideology and the rhetoric of community concerns and employees’ interests. By carefully controlling the ISD discourse focused on common interests and unity and by using the rhetoric of the ‘human side of organisation’ (Alvesson & Deetz 2000) concerned with eg. job enrichment, quality of work life, workers’ empowerment, etc., the dominant group ensures that the dominated feel socialised and that the ‘right’ views and interests are ‘naturally’ represented in the analysis and design of IS. As a result meanings are colonised while those subjected to manipulation feel comfortable in the relationships of domination. Pretence of lifeworld concerns embedded in the ISD processes helps voluntary consent of those manipulated and deceived.

However, it is important to note that “hegemonic consent is never completely established” (Kincheloe & McLaren 2000, p. 283), and that there is always a risk that some groups may contest the dominant views and models in ISD and also resist and obstruct the IS implementation and use. In the covert hegemonic ISD it is more likely that the resistance and obstruction would take a covert form. As the hegemonic consent weakens and as more groups contest the dominant views and meanings, ISD discourse may move towards dissensus, that is, to the right hand side of the framework.

On the right-hand side of Figure 1, defined by dissensus, ISD discourses unmask false order and unity and reveal tension and confrontation among different, opposing views, values and interests, with potentially transformative and liberatory implications. When ISD involves all stakeholders and is primarily focused on systems’ concerns, ISD discourses are called participatory. When, on the other hand, ISD involves broader participation and focuses on lifeworld issues, seeking social integration and emancipation, it is called the emancipatory ISD discourse. The distinction between the participatory and emancipatory ISD discourses is not clear-cut but rather is a matter of degree.

Participatory ISD discourses cover a range of approaches characterised by involving “users, developers and technology itself in a process of technological development” (Asaro 2000, p. 257). Participatory ISD methodologies explicitly involve representative users in various stages of ISD in order to get better presentation of different views, to create higher quality information requirements and to overcome resistance and validate IS design proposals (Hirschheim & Klein 1994). By focusing on ‘systems’, participatory ISD discourses remain concerned with business processes and their functionality, performance goals (productivity, efficiency and effectiveness), and IS designs to improve functionality and achieve the goals. However, what makes them different from the hegemonic ISD discourse is the assumption of inherent conflicting interests, diversity, and tensions in understanding and describing systems and specifying information requirements. While the tension levels and intensity of conflicts among different user groups may vary, participatory ISD practices in the proposed framework are seen as sites of confrontation of multiple, conflicting discourses and systems of meaning needing elaborate processes of argumentation and meaning negotiation (Figure 1).

Depending how an organisation deals with inherent conflicts and tensions and to what extent an ISD discourse challenges prevailing assumptions, values and representations, and seeks democratic change and a transformative social action, the discourse may have emancipatory implications. The emancipatory ISD discourse is characterised by open confrontation of different views, explicit recognition of social values, and productive dissension that encourage creation of inter-subjective meanings and ultimately social integration. The emancipatory ISD discourse, however, may be seen as self-contradicting: it is grounded in dissensus but aims to achieve consensus. In fact, the notion of consensus achieved through open dialogue and communicative action (Habermas 1987) is opposite to the notion of hegemonic consent. Reaching shared understanding and agreement communicatively is an emergent process, always partial and temporary. While it aims to decrease conflicts and tensions it assumes that they cannot be eliminated.

While both dissensus ISD discourses – participatory and emancipatory – aim at decreasing and resolving conflicts, both involve a risk of going too far in recognising and respecting different views and interests which may have the opposite effect and lead to increasing conflicts and political fights. Such a tendency will have a disabling impact on the ISD process. Furthermore, there is a risk of a premature closure in exploring different options in an ISD causing
the participatory discourse to slip into hegemonic consent, and the emancipatory ISD to slip into cultural domination and subtle manipulation that is a covert hegemonic discourse (towards the left-hand side of Figure 1).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper explores ISD as discursive practices and proposes the discursive framework by employing two dimensions of contrast: the ‘consensus-dissensus’ dimension and the ‘systems-lifeworld’ dimension. By combining these two dimensions, four types of ISD discourses are defined: hegemonic, covert hegemonic, participatory and emancipatory. The discursive ISD framework draws attention to the issues of ideology, operations of power, authority and domination, production and legitimation of meanings, and how they all shape representations of reality and specifications of IS. The discursive framework suggests a particular seeing of the ISD processes and motivates a particular deconstruction of the ISD discursive regimes. The question is does such seeing reveal differences that matter? Does the discursive framework provide insights into relevant and interesting differences in ISD practices and research? Can it inspire a different research agenda in ISD?

The analysis of ISD practices through the lens of the discursive ISD framework helps reveal differences in orientation towards dominant discourses and assumptions about unity, order and consensus and furthermore how ISD discourses reproduce or disrupt existing social orders, power structures and the construction of reality. Such analysis may also provide insights into ISD discursive practices that reveal differences in ‘representations of reality’ in IS by different actors and how ISD impede or advance alternative representations and the struggle for the emancipation of meaning. Moreover, the analysis informed by the discursive framework draws attention to the ways ISD processes limit or enable organisational transformation, performance improvements and meeting human needs.

In addition, the discursive framework may help IS developers and researchers reflect on and understand better the role they play in ISD practices and how they construct themselves in these practices. It may also assist their understanding and focus attention on the nature of ISD discursive practices, the prevailing ISD discourse type, and the ways an ISD discourse shifts from one type to another (especially regarding the risks involved).

Do these differences matter? Whether the actors are treated as objects that suffer consequences of an ISD or as participants with a legitimate voice in ISD, should matter. Whether an IS developer or researcher conceives IS as value-neutral tools for increased efficiency and control or as social constructions enabling transformative action, does matter. Should ISD research aim to further improve methodologies to increase the perfectibility of the tools or to improve social interaction processes? Whether an IS developer or researcher positions herself or himself in the role of a supporter or a challenger of a dominant discourse, also matters. The distinctions that the analysis of the ISD discourses reveals do matter.

The discursive ISD framework defines ideal types. It is important to understand that the lines of demarcation are not rigid. They are inherently permeable and one discourse converges towards the other. Each ISD discourse type has its own risks that may adversely affect the system designed. Also, a particular ISD discourse may at one time be of one type and then change to another (eg. emancipatory discourse may change and transform into the covert hegemonic). Future research is called for to provide deeper understanding of these dynamics and the social consequences of ISD practices – for the dominant and the dominated, for individuals and for organisations.

5. REFERENCES


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