RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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An Approach for the Analysis of Evaluative Discourse in International Networks on Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The research work presented in this chapter is focused on the evaluation activities that took place within the international Comenius Lifelong Learning Network on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), called SUPPORT “Partnership and Participation for a Sustainable Tomorrow”. The evaluation framework of SUPPORT was consistent with the ‘socio-critical paradigm’, which took into account the common ESD values shared by the participants and their vision of the ‘quality’ they wanted to achieve through the network. A Reflective Activity Report (RAR) was one of the tools for evaluating SUPPORT activities. The aim of a RAR is to promote reflection by the network actors. This chapter presents an approach for the analysis of evaluative discourse in ESD, which can be applied to the analysis of the evaluative language used in the RAR’s. A qualitative analysis methodology based on Kaplan’s Appraisal Theory was developed which takes into account the three meta-functions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. In doing so, we want to claim the importance of the use of language when conducting evaluation activities and evaluative research on ESD.

Keywords

Educational evaluation; Education for sustainable development; Socio-Educational Networks; Discourse analysis; Appraisal Theory

Aim and Objectives

This chapter aims to present an approach to the analysis of evaluative discourse in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) which was applied to analyse the language of the reflective reports written to evaluate activities of Comenius SUPPORT Network on ESD. Language is a means by which writers/speakers construct and interpret meanings in social contexts, i.e., it is conceived as a system of available
meanings that writers/speakers select and organize in such a way as to build the text in a situated context (Ghio and Fernandez, 2005). A Reflective Activity Report (RAR) is linguistic production that can be used to help construct the meaning of ESD through the use of evaluative language. This meaning is captured by the three metafunctions of the semantic system of language: ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1985).

BACKGROUND OF THE SUPPORT NETWORK
SUPPORT (Partnership and Participation for a Sustainable Tomorrow) was a Comenius III Network running from 2007 to 2010, which is used as the context for this research. SUPPORT was established in order to address the need to enhance the quality of educational practices and material in line with the challenges of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The overall objective was to promote ESD in European schools. The project brought concepts and issues of sustainable development (SD) into the education system by linking schools, research institutions and communities in a web-based network supported through ICT (Sandas, 2010).

SUPPORT involved the cooperation of actors from 21 countries and 40 institutions and different professional backgrounds, such as researchers, teachers, policy makers and environmental educators. Interaction and cooperation among key stakeholders and best practice exchange were facilitated by thematic conferences, workshops, a Comenius mobility seminar, Comenius school partnership contact seminars and Arion study visits. The activities were managed and coordinated through an annual steering group and partner meetings, and monitored and evaluated based on indicators. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training was responsible for the financial and legal matters of the SUPPORT network, and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences coordinated the SUPPORT network and was responsible for the management of the consortium (Sandas, 2010).

SUPPORT EVALUATION PLAN
The purpose of the SUPPORT Evaluation plan was to promote reflection, gain knowledge and make decisions so that the network reached its goals (Mayer and Espinet, 2008). In order to do this the network envisaged three evaluation strategies: Monitoring, Internal Evaluation and External Evaluation. These were coordinated by different people who maintained constant contact with each other.

The aims of the internal monitoring, internal evaluation and external evaluation conducted by SUPPORT (Benedict, 2008) were to:
• track the status of the project;
• ensure the quality of work, outcomes and products;
• provide the project with feedback during the process about how to improve project implementation;
• improve attainment of the project goals.

The internal evaluation was assigned to one partner, the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Catalonia, Spain. One of the authors of this chapter managed this process. The purpose of the Internal Evaluation was to provide the tools and processes for participants to reflect on, and learn from, each of the activities and events promoted in the Support Network (Espinet and Sabio, 2008). One of these tools was a Reflective Activity Report (RAR), which focused on the reflection of those involved in the coordination of activities and the coordination of the SUPPORT network.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The SUPPORT Evaluation Plan promoted the improvement of the quality of the Comenius SUPPORT network activities through the ‘socio-critical paradigm’, consistent with the complexity of both educational processes and the concept of sustainability (Mayer and Mogensen, 2007). This evaluation framework took into account the common values of ESD shared by the participants, their vision of the ‘quality’ they wanted to achieve through the SUPPORT network, the concrete activities and the products produced (Mayer and Espinet, 2008). In doing so, SUPPORT allowed the partners to develop a range of quality criteria to guide the network action and be the focus of the SUPPORT evaluation strategies. These quality criteria have been set as ‘Semantic Domains on ESD’ in this research work.

The model of evaluation proposed by this work evolved from the general theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1985) and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; 1982), by using Kaplan’s Appraisal Theory (Kaplan, 2007). Appraisal Theory is concerned with the personal meaning of language by which writers adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate. It is concerned with how writers approve and disapprove, with how they align or do not align themselves with actual or potential respondents, and with how they position their readers/listeners to do likewise. It is concerned with the construction of communities of shared feelings and values through text, and with the linguistic mechanisms for the sharing of emotions, tastes and normative assessments (Martin and White, 2005).
Semantic readings of the contents and value positions constructed by writers are challenges aimed at by the Appraisal Functions within the Appraisal Theory approach. The writers in texts adopt three evaluative stances (figure 1): the attitudinal position and the dialogistic position are considered the primary modes of evaluative positioning. The intertextual position is considered a subtype of the dialogistic position (Kaplan, 2007).

Figure 1. Appraisal Functions based on Appraisal Theory
(based on: Kaplan, 2007)

- **The Attitudinal position** can be an emotional, ethical or aesthetic position and, ultimately, an ideological one. It refers to the meanings by which writers express their approval, their blame or responsibility addressed to people, places, objects, events and situations.
- **The Dialogistic position** is related to the writers’ meanings that are negotiable. The statements are considered as responses to previous statements or used to anticipate possible objections or questions.
- **The Intertextual position** is linked to the meanings by which writers take evaluative stances from external propositions (views and assertions from others). Normally this position is reflected in the citations or references to the words or thoughts of others.
METHODOLOGY
This work has collected data from 11 out of the 15 activities organised by the SUPPORT network between November 2007 and September 2010. These activities were grouped into three different SUPPORT events: special events (workshops (WS), contact seminars (CS) and Arion study visits (ASV)), thematic conferences (TC) and partner meetings (PM).

The data collection tools were Reflective Activity Reports (RAR) written to evaluate the SUPPORT activities. The sample contained 13 RAR, which were written by different authors, in different geographical places and at different times. The text structure of the reports includes descriptive and reflective practices. Guidelines for writing an RAR were provided by the SUPPORT evaluators with an emphasis being made that the guidelines was or were a tool for inspiration and not a set of rules to follow. The main points of them are listed below: 1. Background; 2. Program; 3. Description of activities; 4. Internal evaluation questionnaire; 5. A reflection on the activity; 6. Annex. The RAR’s were expected to be focused, and be written in first person using a free style.

RAR authors were the coordinator of the network (NC) and coordinators of the activity (AC). They were reflecting on and therefore engaged in the process of thinking and identifying the most important issues in relation to successes, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement of the activity. There was a diversity in the topics the authors of the RAR’s were asked to reflect on and themes included: the organisation, the venue, the visions on ESD, the learning opportunities, the establishment of partnership and the building of interactions of SUPPORT network.

A qualitative analysis methodology was used to study the meaning of the evaluative language in the discourse of the RAR so that the content and values used by the actors of international networks on ESD could be identified. The results of this work have been presented in depth elsewhere (Sabio, 2015).

ANALYTICAL APPROACH
The analysis of the evaluative discourse within the RARs identified three semantic domains. These are called ‘Semantic domains on ESD networks’, and are related to the ‘Semantic system metafunctions of language’ such as the ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1985) (figure 2):
• **Semantic domains on ESD.** These refer to the common values of ESD and the visions of quality of ESD network products, shared by SUPPORT partners. These domains are related to the Ideational metafunction of language including: interactions and exchanges, learning, new visions on ESD, facilities and special requirements, organization and time management.

• **Appraisal semantic domains.** These refer to the meaning of the evaluative stances adopted by writers in their text. These meanings were put into one of three evaluative positions: attitudinal, dialogical and intertextual (Kaplan, 2007). In their text, writers express their emotions, judgements and tastes, adopt a stance towards these value positions and with respect to those they address, up-scale and down-scale what they want to say. These domains are related to the Interpersonal metafunction of language, and include: attitude, engagement and gradation.

• **Semantic domains of the structure of written text.** These refer to the meaning regarding the cohesion and coherence in the text related to the Textual metafunction. These domains update ideational and interpersonal meanings as a coherent language in cohesive text and include: background, summary, introduction, development, assessment of activity and conclusion.

An example of using this analytical approach in the RARs sentences can be appreciated below, in the first Partner meeting (PMI) of SUPPORT network written by the coordinator of the network (NC):

PMI RAR, by NC:

“A wonderful dancing and music social evening arranged by the hosts on Wed-
Wednesday night, however, brought everyone together. The minstrel event and participatory music-making on Thursday evening was also fun and brought the group together laughing. This is important!!

Semantic Domains identified: [INTERACTIONS AND EXCHANGES] [ATTITUDE] [DEVELOPMENT]:
- INTERACTIONS AND EXCHANGES (Semantic domain on ESD): “…brought everyone together...and participatory music-making...brought the group together laughing…”
- ATTITUDE (Appraisal semantic domain): “A wonderful dancing...was also fun and brought the group together laughing. This is important!!”
- DEVELOPMENT (Semantic domain of the structure of written text): It is a part of the text structure that describes the discourse, it is situated in the middle of text.

CONCLUSIONS
The analytical tool presented in this chapter positions the authors in front of language in a less naïve way compared with normal practise in the evaluation in ESD. The tools used for evaluation in ESD in general and ESD networks more specifically, seldom look at the language use as an essential element of evaluative practices. By adopting an approach to language use in ESD networks within the frame of systemic functional linguistics and more specifically of Appraisal Theory, the authors have attempted to provide a tool to understand evaluative practices in ESD networks in a more complex way.

Reflective Activity Reports build evaluative discourses on ESD networks which are situated, reflecting the sensitivity of the writer to negotiate the meaning with the reader, and adopt a specific open textual structure. Given that these evaluative tools are difficult to write as well as to analyse many ESD networks do not encourage them as regular evaluation instruments. However, the authors of the chapter support the idea that reflective writing such as the RAR is necessary to provide ESD international networks with the opportunity to build particular ways of understanding the what, how and why of ESD network activities.

REFERENCES


