coastal Collaboration Cluster

Knowledge Systems Theme

Discourse analysis guide

The way in which we think, write and talk about the coast has important implications for the way in which it is understood and subsequently governed. While language may be thought of as mere semantics, discourse theory highlights the importance of understanding the ideological work that language does (Fairclough 1992).

Language therefore serves to construct and organise rather than directly reflect social reality, with the importance of this illustrated in the view that "It makes no sense to consider the 'objects' or targets of policy as existing independently of the way in which they are spoken about or represented either in political debate or policy proposals. Any description of an issue or a 'problem' is an interpretation, and interpretations involve judgment and choices" (Bacchi 1999: 1).

This does not mean that words are the only things that matter: instead, language is the way in which humans make sense of the world.

This is succinctly expressed in the view that "While real problems exist, our interaction with them can only ever be through culturally constructed lens – meaning that we can never know nature except through the interpretive mechanism of culture, which means that all perspectives are partial and contestable" (Dryzek's 1997: 10).

Analysing texts (written, spoken, visual) and practices therefore provides a means for examining knowledge relations, dealing with issues such as the representation of reality, relationships and identities. Discourse analysis is useful in uncovering:

- The framing of issues, people & relationships (eg what is considered as useful knowledge)
- How the uptake of concepts & practices occurs.

Further Reading

Bacchi, C. 1999. *Women, Policy and Politics: The Construction of Policy Problems*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Dryzek, J. 1997. *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.