The theory of discourse as a theoretical and methodological approach in the field of public policies in education

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Abstract
Assessment, as an institutional practice, has been designed for the sphere of higher education in response to the conflicts that prevail in the discourses that seek dominance in this field. Assessment is a discourse that clarifies the meanings, beliefs and values of both people and institutions with regard to conflicts and states of tension, as well as disputes and authority. Understanding assessment as being a discourse creates a need to follow an analytical path that places us in a realm beyond mere words and takes account of contexts, people, and meanings that are established through social practices. Thus, the Dicourse Theory provides theoretical and methodological categories that can assist us in conducting an analysis of the meanings surrounding the discourses of (and within) assessment. The reason for this is that in the Dicourse Theory, language is not regarded as the core of analysis but rather as one of the dimensions of social practices, and involves the inclusion of people and their relationships within a social domain that is constituted and being transformed.

Keywords
Discourse theory, assessment, discourse, politics.

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In this article, we trace the path followed by discourse, while bearing in mind that our objective is to explain the Discourse Theory as a theoretical and methodological category within the field of educational policies, particularly those that are centred on assessment. The article is structured as follows: we begin with a discussion about the emergence of the key features of assessment as a means of control in a period of State reform. However, it should be stressed that the discourse of assessment as a form of control and regulation, involves a struggle to establish meaning in the realm of higher education and that it is constituted as a political discourse. Following this, we will examine some of the features of the discourse in the social sciences, with special attention to the way it can be employed as a methodological category so that it can be understood as a theory, without ignoring the methodological issues which form one of its constituent parts. Finally, setting out from the discourse theory, we highlight some of the key categories that can aid us in conducting an analysis of institutional assessment when understood as a political discourse.

The Central Feature of Assessment: Regulation and Control

A number of studies have discussed the question of assessment by exploring various issues such as the following: modalities (summative, normative, criterion-referenced, formative, diagnostic), strategies (examining needs, following learning, checking the level of understanding), approaches (emancipatory, sociological, formative/self-regulated, mediated, diagnostic), tools (exercises, examinations, tests), objects (institutions, educational policies, teachers, courses, learning and assessment itself – *meta-evaluation),* functions (proactive, retroactive, control, classificatory, diagnostic), formats (initial, final, continuous, processual) and policies (SAEB, SINAES, PISA[1]). According to De Sordi (2002: 71), "Since an assessment is a multi-faceted and plural reality, at times we make use of the plural form and speak about assessments"; moreover, perhaps in light of this social practice (which is increasingly becoming a feature of human relationships), we may come across discourses that are completely at odds with their social meaning.

Assessment as a social practice has played a key role in school practices and in particular, in practices carried out by teachers for their students. In this context, assessment is

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generally associated with texts, exams, marks, grading, and the selection of students, and largely carried out in the area of schooling. Thus the approach adopted for the assessment of learning is governed by different perspectives about what is being assessed, the need for assessment and the means that are used, as well as a number of myths about its purpose and degree of importance.

When evaluative practice is bound up with institutional procedures, it involves us in various areas such as the following: goals, criteria, individuals, the devices and tools that are employed within an institution, the key players, the relationships they establish and the activities they carry out. It thus goes beyond the students themselves and the use of assessment as an instrument to measure the achievement of the students in the classroom.

The importance that is being attached to the assessment of learning is leading to evaluative activities being reduced to the employment of practices that distance teachers from their institutional dimension and restrict the scope of their activities to the learning process. However, in a broader sense, it is worth stressing, as Dias Sobrinho (2003a: 93) points out that "Assessment is essentially political because it is attached to social interests and has public effects of great significance to society". In the sphere of evaluative activity, we seek to establish what can be regarded as right or wrong, valid and legitimate; this involves employing concepts, making sharp distinctions and struggling for the acceptance of ideas. Assessing is a social practice by which is meant that it is not an activity that is inherent in a single individual but- rather- comprises individuals in relation with each other who are acting, reacting and interacting. In this sense, assessment can be understood as a meaningful social practice that combines words and actions and as a result becomes a discourse.

The discourse of assessment leads to different types of meaning, although the meaning that is assigned in an evaluative act cannot be characterized as a universalized meaning; in other words, there is no single or rather absolute meaning that is permanent; on the contrary, meaning is provisional, incomplete and of a fragile nature even within fixed historical and social conditions. This is why establishing a meaning entails a constant search within the struggle that takes place in the realm of discursiveness. In view of the fact that there is no guarantee that any determined explanations or outcomes of meaning can be endowed with a universal validity, there is always a conflict arising from any attempt to dominate the field of discursiveness with regard to the meanings that accrue around a society, institution, group of individuals, things or concepts.

In this sense, assessment is essentially political since it belongs to the sphere of power struggle and conflict when it establishes values and its meaning is bound up with practices and individuals: assessment is political.

Assessment as an institutional practice is being designed for the field of higher education through the conflicts that govern the discourses for the domination of this sphere. As a discourse it has led to the use of tools, procedures and strategies that, on one hand, are essential requirements when attempting to obtain results and scores, make comparisons and draw up classifications (while underlining the different traits of individuals, practices and institutions). On the other hand, they support an approach in which the results and tools assist in forming a new perspective that paves the way for training and human emancipation.

First of all, the discussion about Institutional Assessment does not lead us to regard it as something that lies within the privileged area of education. Rather, as Sander (2008: 11)

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makes clear, Institutional Assessment "originated and evolved from a broader context of applied social sciences, especially in administration, both in the world of business and the public sector".

From the perspective of the regulation and State control of higher education institutions, assessment began to play a key role in the way higher education policies were shaped during the period of sharp recession in the 1970s when low economic growth and high inflation called into question the social welfare schemes of capitalist countries. Attempts to overcome the crisis led States to implement reforms that included giving priority to the State´s role as a "promoter" and replacing it with that of a "regulator" (Zainko; Coelho, 2007).

In Brazil, the issue of the need for State reform began as a debate/prospect in the political arena in the 1980s, "in the midst of a serious economic crisis which reached its peak at the beginning of the 1990s when the country underwent a period of hyperinflation" (Bresser Pereira, 1998: 43). As a result, reforms were justified as a response to an economic crisis. According to Brito (1999: 36), "it was in this period that a new conceptual model acted as a framework for ensuring Brazil was embedded in the world economy with regard to its trade and industrial policies and for the role of the State in the economy and its institutions". The "new" role of the State emerged as a paradigm of "governability", which involved a reduction of its involvement in terms of funding and an increase of public bodies of control and assessment. "Educational reform in this area was conceived as one of the crucial means of modernizing production in the Brazilian economy" (Zainko; Coelho, 2007: 110). The educational reforms were based on the assumption that there was a need to establish the following priorities: differentiation, institutional diversification and performativity i.e. discourses of quality, responsibility, efficiency and competitiveness (Ball, 2004).

Thus, there was an underlying assumption in the reforms that there was a need to seek to adapt the teaching systems, individuals and institutions to diversified and flexible curricula and new forms of management and ways of restructuring courses. These had to cater for the requirements of the following: the modernized production of the emerging markets; training that gave priority to technological skills in the workplace; changes in the competitive nature of the contemporary world and the development of skills required for the market. Peixoto (2004: 175) believes that official systems of control were adopted in this economic climate which, with regard to higher education, comprised "methods of control that were validated by an external authority" and began to constitute the main feature of the field of higher education.

However, institutional assessment did not begin to be carried out within the framework of State Reform; it was already being tried out in institutions with the production of tools, concepts, and plans. As well as this, it was shaped in the form of wide-ranging objectives that had emerged from the educational policies of MEC[2] in the context of State Reform.

 In the area of education, its use provided evidence of two conflicting discourses: one that supported its democratic and participative character and aimed at human training, while the other, which seems to have been more evident in the 1990s, was linked to an international movement that was attached to the concept of *accountability*[3].

The term *accountability*, as used in Brazil, in the context of State Reform, was translated by Bresser Pereira (1997) as "responsabilização [the act of taking on full responsibility]", and regarded as one of the essential requirements of governability. According to Bresser Pereira, "governability in democratic regimes depends on (...) (b) the existence

of mechanisms for the assumption of full responsibility (*accountability*) of politicians and official administrators in the eyes of society (...)"(Bresser Pereira, 1997: 46). With regard to this sense, Bresser Pereira argues that:

> Without doubt, a basic intermediary goal of any democratic regime is to increase the "responsabilização" (*accountability)* of the ruling authorities. Politicians must be constantly accountable to citizens. The clearer the responsibilities of the politicians in the eyes of the citizens, and the compliance with these by the ruling class, the more democratic will be the regime (Ibidem: 49).

In the concept that is outlined, Bresser Pereira (1997) articulates what he understands to be the two aspects of the responsibilities of politicians in their ¨representativeness¨ and the actions "of citizens" in setting out requirements with regard to this accepted ¨representativeness¨. This 'rendering of accounts' to society as a part of *accountability*, gains materiality from two processes: an effective intervention by the State and the reforms of State intervention that enable it to be more effective and competitive. These require a regulatory procedure, which can allow information, mandatory explanation and punishment to be included in the paradigm of full acceptance of responsibility. The regulatory procedures require the use of devices for assessing performativity (Ball, 2005).

For this reason, the assessment of results or measuring of performativity of an institution, takes place when the paradigm changes under the direction of the State and there is a need to highlight the performance of higher education institutions in this direction, as well as to assess the students and their activities in the light of criteria established from outside. Guadilla (2002) underlines the fact that this "change" takes place in a climate of reform, and requires alterations in the organizations with regard to the legitimacy of producing, spreading and evaluating knowledge, which, among other reasons, gains momentum through:

> (...) internationalization, the impact of information and communication in all the processes related to the production, distribution and evaluation of knowledge technology (...) and hence is a recognition of the value of accountability as a means of establishing the trustworthiness of institutions (Guadilla, 2002: 44).

In this context of "rendering an account", as was mentioned earlier, assessment takes up a central position as an instrument that is able to translate the quality, significance and current performance of institutions in the face of the demands or challenges of the Market and the kind of training required in the ¨new¨ climate of competition. As a result, there emerges a need to use the evaluative devices that show results in scores. The close link between the practice of assessment and the formulation of devices that enable a measurement of performance to be carried out, suggests that, in the educational field, this is closely bound up with a technicist conception of evaluation linked to managerialism.

The discourses about the assessment of higher education underline the need for accountability to society, an improvement of responsibilities, a control of the standards of courses and the institution, through measuring the learning of students, controlling the academic work produced and monitoring the institution to determine if it is up-to-date and innovative.

In the discourse of assessment that lays stress on performativity, the State has the task of evaluating effectiveness and the relationship between costs and results; this new evaluative rationale is related to the functions of classifying, controlling and inspecting which characterize the "Evaluative State" (Neave, 1988). According to Ball, this rationale

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"allows the State to be deeply involved in the culture, practices and subjectivity of public sector institutions and the workers, without seeming to be" (Ball, 2004: 1116).

This discourse of assessment is the rival of another discourse, which exists in the field of higher education as a "democratic", "participative" and "formative" evaluation. It is interpreted in this way by Dias Sobrinho (2003a) who states that human training is the focal point of the practice of assessment, a view that is also supported by Afonso (2008: 74) with regard to formative assessment, which is viewed as "the only modality of assessment that is grounded on dialogue and suited to a continuous readjustment of the teaching process so that everyone is able to attain defined objectives successfully and reveal their creative potential".

The fact that there are conflicting discourses in the field of educational assessment policies "provides evidence that we are dealing with a political field" (Peixoto, 2004: 176). It should be noted that politics is a set of practices, institutions and discourses which seek to create an order and lay down rules through which social togetherness can be achieved. This is a situation where human unrest is possible given the fact that the antagonistic dimension of politics is inherent in the way human relations are constituted. (Laclau; Mouffe, 2006).

Our understanding of the political field is based on the way it is defined by Bourdieu (2010: 163-164), where it is "understood as being at the same time a field of power and a field of struggle, which aims at transforming the power relations that confer its structure on this field at any given moment". The field of higher education has undergone tensions caused by the confrontation/dispute of the assessment discourses that seek to dominate the field. In this game/dispute, constructed assessment tools enable the discourses to materialize. The instruments "explain" the discourse as representing "a kind of ratification or legitimacy" (Ibidem: 165) of the discourse. However, with regard to institutional assessment, the dispute that is found in the field makes it clear that assessment cannot be reduced to a mere measuring technique since it should be regarded as a means of seeking quality.

As Dias Sobrinho (2003a) states, institutional assessment is a way of reflecting on a survey conducted on the basis of a diagnosis. This provides evidence of the needs, vulnerable points, strengths and weaknesses that require a kind of decision-making in the face of the results, while bearing in mind the need to achieve "quality" or make improvements to the institution. Thus, institutional assessment appears to be a means of obtaining what is desired through continuous and reflective action on the performance of institutional tasks. When assessment is analysed as a policy, it can be included in this investigative field about higher education in an attempt to analyse the discourse that is formed about institutional assessment.

Understanding assessment as a discourse, requires following an analytical trajectory which can place us beyond words and that can take account of the contexts, individuals, and meanings that are formed in social practices. However, the treatment of institutional assessment as an object of study in the field of educational policies, lacks a methodological approach that is able to view language not as the focal point of analysis but as one of the dimensions of social practices. This entails the inclusion of individuals and their relationship with a social milieu that is constituted and being transformed.

The Discourse: Aspects of the Debate in the Social Sciences
According to Burity (2007), the analysis of the discourse (henceforth denoted by the letters AD) began to be employed as an alternative methodology in the social sciences

as an outcome of the influence of the French analysis of the discourse in the area of language, one of its theorists being Pêcheux. The studies of Pêcheux (2002) are concentrated on issues regarding the functional aspect of language, with the focal point being the place of production and the mechanisms that give rise to "the evidence" for the meaning. This approach requires the analyst to provide a "description" and "interpretation". As Pêcheux states with regard to the job of the analyst: "The first requirement consists of giving pride of place to the gestures employed in the description of discursive materialities" (Pêcheux, 2002: 50). According to the author, description is the first requirement but this does not end the job of the analyst when it is borne in mind that description is an investigative process that is very characteristic of the positivist and naturalist tradition. This "disengages the spectator", as is Howarth (2000) points out.

According to Guba and Lincoln, "The term ´positivism´ denotes the 'dominant vision' that has governed the formal discourse in the physical and social sciences for 400 years" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 108). In the case of this paradigm, research is based on the principle of searching for truth, which is effected through obtaining knowledge of reality. To achieve a knowledge of reality, the researcher must exercise his powers of observation. Finding out is observing. In the positivist paradigm, description is an analytical category that is based on the assumption that: "Knowledge is only real if it is grounded on observed facts" (Comte, 1978: 24). Hence, the principle underlying the description of reality is that knowing is: a statement of "what things are like" and determining a cause-and-effect relationship through which results can be generalized. This kind of paradigm is criticized by the Interpretive Sciences, including hermeneutics, phenomenology and the analysis of the discourse (Schwandt, 1994).

The apprehension of meaning is the objective of those who study social phenomena on the basis of the Interpretive Sciences In their view, the social phenomenon must be understood and this means going beyond description. With regard to the objective, this can thus be defined as studying, interpreting and understanding reality, which implies understanding and interpreting the meanings and practices that are constructed. By following the same interpretation and citing the work undertaken by the Science of Hermeneutics, Howarth (2000: 172) pointed out that: "hermeneutics is always found in a world of constructed meanings and practices and seeks to make this world more intelligible".

The criticism of positivism with regard to its objective explanation of reality is grounded on the restricted way that the research model that this approach supports can be applied to social practices. In the positivist approach, emphasis is laid on scientific rationality based on principles such as the following: unity in science in terms of a logical and methodological foundation, a hypothetic-deductive model, the universality of scientific knowledge and the neutrality of the researcher. Hence the social sciences rest on the premise that society must be studied in an objective, neutral way that is free of prejudice, value judgements and preconceptions (Santos, 2000).

The interpretive sciences state that the action of understanding reality cannot be methodologically understood as describing reality since the researcher has the task of understanding and interpreting this reality. Nor can this reality be regarded as an objective datum or natural phenomenon when the laws observed with regard to a small section of the phenomenon are applied in a generalized way to the whole universe. In contrast, social reality is a "world of constructed meanings and practices", as pointed out by Howarth (2000).

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The understanding of the importance of meanings laid down by people in the historical and social relationships that they establish, can be reconsidered in the light of the propositions set out by Pêcheux (2002). In view of this and without ignoring the question of description, it can be postulated as being a part of the methodological activity. However, if understanding this is restricted to the apprehension of meaning, this gives rise to the need for an alternative course of action by the analyst, another requirement – "interpretation". The reason for this in the opinion of Pêcheuxis that "Everything that is written, every sequence of words is thus linguistically describable as a series (...) of possible derivative points that offer a space for interpretation. It is within this space that the analysis of discourse intends to operate" (Pêcheux, 2002: 53).

Description is subject to uncertainty in the face of the "displacement of meaning", and this displacement leads to the requirement for interpretation that operates in the face of the "derivative points" (Pêcheux, 2002) of meanings that are displaced for "another", and "become ´other´ and different from themselves"; these are factors that are not dealt with by description. However, in the opinion of Orlandi (1988), there was a third requirement that arose because meaning is not attributed to the analysis of discourse. This was produced in an immediate and historical context and as a result "what it [AD] does is to question the relationship with the text by only seeking to explain the processes of meaning that are configured in it and the mechanisms of production of meaning that are functioning" (Ibidem: 117). The AD understands that the meaning of discourse is not arbitrary but rather constitutive of relations established with culture, history and the social domain through language. This involves an action of "making explicit" the processes involved in the production of meaning.

Description, interpretation and the explanation of the mechanism of producing meaning become methodological devices for the AD, and these are employed by the social sciences. They offer researchers a methodological alternative that distances itself from the natural sciences based on description and observation.

It is worth noting that with regard to the analysis of the discourse, there are those who do not consider it to be a method and prefer to call it "Studies of Discourse", like Dijk, when he stated that "The analysis of discourse in itself is not a method; rather it constitutes a domain of academic practices (...). I prefer to use the label Discourse Studies (DS)" (Dijk, 2008: 11). The author stresses that AD is transdisciplinary because it depends on the objectives of the question that needs investigating or that arise from the nature of the data (or interests or skills) of the researcher. This places the AD in the domain of academic practices but does not allow it to represent a method.

Dijk adds that: "methods (...) are chosen in a way that can enable research to assist in the social empowerment of dominated groups, especially in the domain of discourse and communication" (Ibidem: 13). The AD can be used in various ways to carry out research into the mechanisms of domination employed in discourse and communication. This is what the author prefers to describe as "analytical approaches in studies of discourse", since they allow the researcher to deploy them among those that already exist in the social sciences, such as participant observation and an ethnographic method, which can be combined.

Diverging from Dijk with regard to methodological factors, writers such as Fairclough (2008) and Silva (2002) put forward two approaches: "Critical Discourse Analysis ", (henceforth described by the letters CDA), and "non-critical analysis". What distinguishes the two approaches according to Silva, is that "CDA does not only describe but shows how the

discourse is moulded by power relations and ideology" (Silva, 2002: 9-10), while the non-critical analysis operates through the description and interpretation of discursive practices.

Silva (2002) adds the following characteristics to a critical approach: studies that seek to show the effects of the power relations that can be found in the discourse, a struggle for/within power, the ways the reproduction of power can be ensured, systems of knowledge and belief, the means of legitimizing power relations and the ideological effects on societies and institutions.

With regard to the division of the field of AD, Fairclough (2008: 31-32) thinks that although it is not absolute, it can be seen in the description of discursive practices. More significantly, this division makes clear that the critics are those who understand discourse to be a social practice when they are studying discursive practices, and that this is "moulded by power relations and ideologies" and their effects on people in the world and in other areas. Thus it can be regarded as a system of constructed knowledge and beliefs which helps to reproduce and transform society. However, it should be noted that its constructive effects are not always evident to the people.

According to Fairclough (2008), discourse helps form social structures that are reproduced ideologically in the discourse, at the same time as they both mould and restrict the discourse. Since it is constructed in the relationships formed in social practice, discourse is not the construction of an individual; rather it is found to be rooted in ideological, political economic and cultural frameworks, where it establishes a relationship of interdependence with power and ideology. In this regard Fairclough states that all the processes of textual production, distribution and consumption are social processes and "need to be benchmarked in economic, political and private institutional environments where the discourse is produced" (Fairclough, 2008: 99).

According to the author in AD, the text as discourse must be understood from the perspective of intertextuality, while taking account of forms of production, distribution and consumption. This requires a historical analysis of the texts and sends us back to the conditions of production defined by Foucault, in his work *The Order of Discourse*.

Foucault assumes that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures" (Foucault, 2006: 8-9), which can be grouped in a ´first category´, the function of which is the control, delimitation and subjugation of discourse, whether it is internal or external.

Among the procedures of control that function as external systems of exclusion and which "put into play power and desire " (Ibidem: 21), Foucault draws attention to the following: interdictions that operate by means of taboos, rituals and the right to say a word, which "soon reveal its links with desire and power" (Ibidem: 10); separation/rejection – locating the place of the person who speaks and thus "it is enough to think of the whole apparatus of knowing as mediating how we decipher the word; it is enough to think of the whole network of institutions that allow someone (...) to listen to the word " (Ibidem: 12); And it is true or false or the will of truth and the will to know or in other words what is thought to be true or not, is recognized "by the way knowledge is employed in a society, how it is valued, distributed and to a certain degree, assigned" (Ibidem: 17).

Among the internal procedures for the control of discourse which function as an attempt "to submit to another dimension of discourse" (Ibidem: 21), are "the event and chance" (Idem), which exercise control and limits over discourse itself and consist of the following:

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the commentary that "conjures up the chance event of discourse by forming a part of it – this allows it to say something beyond the text itself but only on condition that the text will be uttered and in a certain way put into effect" and operates through memory, interdiscourse, displacement and involuntary reappearance (Ibidem: 25-26); the author who operates as "the principle of the argument of discourse as unity and the origins of its meanings, and as a focal point of its coherence " (Ibidem: 26), by taking on the function of the author; the subjects that need to provide "a plane of determinate objects", which have been constructed "within a model" – these are inscribed in a certain "theoretical horizon", and meet "complex and heavy requirements. Discipline is a principle of control over the production of discourse. It fixes its limits through the action of an identity by taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules." (Ibidem: 36).

There remain the following: a) the procedures that act as systems for restricting discourse which determine "the conditions of their application by imposing a certain number of rules on individuals who employ them and thus do not allow everybody to have access to them" (Ibidem: 36-37), since these are responsible for the "rarefaction among speaking subjects": b) the ritual which "defines the qualifications that the individuals who speak must have" (Ibidem: 39); c) the societies of discourse that operate with the secret nature and disclosure of a discourse, "whose function is to preserve and produce discourses but to do it in a circular way in an enclosed space and only disseminate it in accordance with strict rules without its recipients being dispossessed as a result of its dissemination" (Ibidem: 39); d) the doctrine understood as belonging to a discursive field which is "the only condition required and involves the recognition of the same truths and the acceptance of certain rules (...) which link individuals to certain types of utterance and as a result forbids them from all others" (Ibidem: 42-43); and e) the social appropriation of discourses that "are a political means of keeping or altering the appropriation of discourses together with the knowledge and power that they bring with them" (Ibidem: 44).

It is the task of the analyst to understand how discourses are constructed through the procedures that seek to ensure their production, distribution and control. They should attempt to explain the complex and scattered combination of what constitutes them, by unravelling the series of facts that compose them including both their regularities and dispersion. As Foucault stated: "the analysis of discourse, understood in this manner, does not reveal the universality of meaning; it brings to light the action of imposed rarity with a fundamental strength of affirmation" (Ibidem: 70). The author is thus opposed to the non-existence of a method and the existence of a significance and for this reason his concern is fixed on the manner in which the subjects produce their texts, as much as on their speech and writings.

With regard to a possible gulf in the AD, between critical and non-critical approaches, Maingueneau states that "in fact, the analysis of discourse by its very nature, is accompanied by a critical dimension" (Maingueneau, 2010: 64), which is made material by the selection of objects, the ¨desanctifying¨ character of its nature and by not ¨giving autonomy ¨ to texts related to "social practices and situated interests" (Ibidem: 65). This calls into question the category of the person "which can be found dispersed in a plurality of discursive practices that are regulated and dominated by an 'interdiscourse'" (Idem). In the opinion of this author, the critical analysis of discourse is established in work that is appropriate and constitutes the analysis of the discourse. Hence, there is no analysis of discourse that is not critical. "The borderline between CDA and the analysis of discourse in my understanding, can only be indeterminate". (Maingueneau, 2010: 64).

In adopting the critical dimension as an essential feature of AD, Maingueneau (2010) is opposed to Fairclough (2008) and Silva (2002), He stresses that AD takes on a "critical finality" which makes it impossible for it to be non-critical since the selection of an object for investigation is characterized by a feeling of distrust with regard to language, the questioning of the authority of the texts and a scepticism about the transparency of language.

We understand that the central features of the language that lead the analyst beyond the realm of description, finally reach the field of the interpretive sciences and this is the point of departure for those who conduct an analysis of discourse. However, the central features of language are being displaced, and this work of displacement goes beyond the analysis of discourse as an analytical tool and was involved in the constitution of the debate about a theory of discourse, as is made clear by Burity (2007) and Howarth (2000).

In the following section, we outline a pathway for Discourse that allows it to go beyond methodological issues and draw close to a Discourse theory.

Discourse: from Analysis to Theory

The production of meanings is the "concern" of the Discourse Theory (henceforth referred to as DT), but only when analysed on the basis of the rules and conventions that govern production in a socio-historical context. According to Howarth,

> The Discourse Theory is concerned with the understanding and interpretation of meanings that are socially produced rather than seeking objective causal explanations and this means that one of the main objectives of social research is to outline the specific rules and historic conventions that structure the production of meanings in particular historical contexts (Howarth, 2000: 128).

In DT, the social is the core feature – the social players, the social changes, social explanations, relations and practices and the constitution of the social. In this way, one seeks to provide new ways of interpreting and elucidating meanings – not through the recovery and reconstruction of meanings produced by social players but "through an examination of particular structures in which the social players articulate hegemonic projects and discursive formations" (Ibidem: 129). The theories of discourse must thus explain: "how, under what conditions and for what reasons, discourses are constructed, contested and change" (Ibidem: 131)?

Burity states that "it is not a question of establishing a categorical demarcation" (Burity, 2007: 74) between the DT and AD. However, it seems that the position of Burity (2007) shows divergences from that stated by Howarth (2000), in so far as it regards the researchers of DT as theorists of discourse rather than analysts.

But this is not the main difference. The question is raised about the "opacity" of discourse as a condition or typical state of the "ideological and political". According to Howarth (2000.), since the theoretical object is constructed within a historical system that is closely related to the production of knowledge, the task of the researcher is not to make "intelligible meanings", which lead to a "hermeneutics of recovery", where the inaccessible is not the text itself but its original meaning hidden by practices or discourses. In this sense, the DT acts by understanding and explaining the articulation of people through "hegemonic projects" and "discursive formations" (Idem).

Although, according to Burity (2007), it can be understood that there is no categorical demarcation between the DT and AD, the difference lies in the fact that the DT rejects "the distinction between the discursive and the extra-discursive[4] and the formal definition

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of discourse which transcends the domain of language as carried out in linguistics and assumed to be an empirical fact in the *mainstream* of the social sciences" (Burity, 2007: 73). From this standpoint, language is not regarded as the focal point of analysis but as one of the dimensions of social practice. It entails the inclusion of people and their relationship with the social, which is constituted and changed discursively. In this process, the people and "reality" are also constructed in the realm of the discursive. According to Marchart,

> (...) the realm of "being " coincides exactly with the realm of the discursive and the mere physical existence of an object will always have to be mediated through the discourse. So to the extent that all "being " is discursively constructed and, conversely, the discursive constitutes the horizon of all "being", discourse theory, implicitly or explicitly, constitutes an ontology (Marchart, 2009: 197).

The ontology is a fundamental dimension of the DT, bearing in mind that "being" can only be understood within the discursive field. Hence, the DT can be understood as a Theory of Signification, since according to Marchart, "what we find is not so much a theory of 'political signification', but rather a 'theory of signification'" (Marchart, 2009: 145).

The DT involves a paradigm in which it is advocated that reality should be formed and constructed in social, historical and cultural relations, which embed people in the field of discursiveness. Marchart states that the DT has the status of an ontology: "[I have] given some reasons to support the argument that the discourse theory has the status of an ontology. The nature of "being" is automatically modified when viewed from the perspective of the discourse theory (...)" (Ibidem: 200). The DT assumes that individuals construct the world and endow things with meaning through this significant action. The author puts forward an ontology, a theory of the significance of "being".

Discourse Theory
 From the perspective of the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1990, 2006), the Discourse Theory understands discourse as being social practice, and in this sense, words do not have any value in themselves. Barrett corroborates this by stating that, "discourse is not a text or a speech or something similar. The term refers above all to meaning" (Barrett, 2007: 257). Thus, meaning is not a given fact or an absolute. It is never ready-made and complete, and this means that the analyst must deconstruct the discourses with a view to constructing the meanings that are being articulated in the social practices that belong to a determined historical context and which involve an articulatory and interactive process.

From the standpoint of the DT, discourse is neither confined to speech and writing nor to the search for an underlying and hidden truth, and even less to reconstructing hidden meanings. Rather, it is embedded in a relational system and the engagement of individuals in the significant action of historical and social construction/production. In this way, it seeks to analyse "the manner in which political forces and social players construct meanings within an incomplete and indeterminate social framework" (Howarth, 2000: 129).

This means that every social configuration is a significant configuration (Laclau; Mouffe, 1990) and all "being" is constituted in discourse[5].

The object/thing exists, has a self-reference and materiality regardless of the individual but "the meaning of physical objects should be understood through the apprehension of its place in a system (discourse) of socially constructed norms" (Barrett, 2007: 258). Meaning can only be understood through relations of "classificatory systems", of the "production conditions" and knowledge, which are constructed by individuals in relations

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with each other and which represent contingent and historical factors within the discursive field.

In endowing things – natural and social facts – with meaning -, the discourse constitutes a criterion "of truth", or "the will to truth", as is stated by Foucault:"this will to truth (...) is institutionally supported and it is at once strengthened and renewed by a whole strata of practices..." (Foucault, 2006: 17):. The "classificatory system" is not spontaneous or inherent in beings but is constructed from an "institutional support", derived from a "set of practices" and rules that consent to validate and spread the knowledge that has been produced, and this discursive place is an arena of struggle. What is implied is that meaning is not the thing, object, action and process; "meaning can be ´other´", since it is constructed within a determinate discursive formation.

An object "only is", because it forms a part of a system of relations with other objects and owing to the fact that these relations are socially constructed and not given in "self-contained units". Taking the example of a "stone", used by Laclau and Mouffe (1990), it can be defined as an object of aesthetic contemplation or a projectile. This definition does not cast doubt on its existence, but defines the meaning. Whether it is a projectile or an object of contemplation can only be known in a system of relations.

It is in this way that the identity of the elements is relational and does not allow there to be a "fixed essence". The elements are always exposed to the influence of external structures that Laclau and Mouffe (Ibidem) define as a "system of differences[6]". It should be noted however, as Barrett (2007: 258) makes clear, that there is no question of a self-referenced materiality in this assertion – the existence – of the elements. He adds that: "Laclau and Mouffe do not dispel and dissolve everything in discourse: they insist that whether or not they can learn or think about discourse depends on contextualizing discursive categories". The question thus refers to meaning with regard to an understanding of its construction that results from a system of constituent rules of an articulatory practice or, in other words, "being" and its existence are mediated by discourse.

With regard to the "system of differences" or "discursive", space of the struggle and articulation – or as Marchart stated, "the infinite play of differences" (Marchart, 2009: 182) – what is established as a principle is the impossibility of an ultimate foundation and not the impossibility of any foundation. Difference is not distinction. "The logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity [of political space]" (Laclau; Mouffe, 2006: 174), which will correspond to the articulation of diversified elements that use the same term. For example, Barrett (2007) outlines the analysis that Laclau and Mouffe conduct of the term "Social Movements", which shifts the meaning of "struggle" from its privileged position.

The place occupied by the term "class struggle" is shifted from its meaning to give way to a wide range of feminist, ethnic, ecological, sexual minority and anti-racist struggles among others, which are grouped under the term "Social Movements¨. This "system of differences" brings about a "logic of equivalence". According to Laclau and Mouffe, "the logic of equivalence is a logical means of simplifying political space" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2006: 174). In other words, the discourses that previously occupied a differential position in social space have been grouped and articulated in a new discourse that now represents them.

The logic of equivalence explains the difficulty of the "ultimate fixity of meaning", as well as the non-fixity of meaning. "The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations because if the contrary were the case, even the flow

of difference would be impossible. Even in order to differ and subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning" (Laclau; Mouffe, 2006: 152). Thus, these writers argue that discourse seeks to dominate the field of discursiveness, impede the flow of differences and partially fix the meanings. However, there is nothing to ensure that the determinate explanations or concepts or political projects will be able to be universalized and there is always a conflict and a "set of meanings" in the field of discursiveness.

Marchart (2009) adds that understanding the entire social configuration as a discourse in the "infinite play of differences" is to understand it as being incomplete and fragile in a struggle for the fixity of meaning or the search for a closure. Even though it is always partial and provisional, this is because the external discursive frameworks are always seeking an explanation.

The search for closure is a time of politics, hegemonic struggle, fixity of meaning and antagonism. According to Marchart (2009: 186), "in the theory of Laclau, "antagonism", was originally designated as an equivalential split of a discursive field (...) into two fields", which implies that antagonism separates what is from what is not. This separation distinguishes "non-being" from what was hegemonically articulated as "what is", and this "remainder" – "not being", what was not articulated – makes a closure of the social realm impossible. This is because it has not been excluded or destroyed, but only separated, and it is this "remainder" that makes it possible for new meanings to emerge. "It is also in this meaning that every attempt to fix or establish an order is subject to subversion" (Mutzenberg, 2008: 210). The social relations in the field of discursiveness are constituted as power relations in a search (or attempt) to dominate the field and fix the meaning, soon after the relations are constructed in the realm of politics.[7].

In discourse, social practices, even those that do not appear (at least not openly) to be constructed in the field of conflicts – or rather in the political sphere, for example, "buying a ticket to a concert", in reality are represented as social practices whose social origins might have been forgotten. However, the fact that its origins have been forgotten does not mean they cease to be political and they can be reactivated at any moment owing, for example, to the fact that going to a concert "is converted into a political manifestation " (Marchart, 2009: 198). This means that "wherever we look, we will find the political at the root of social relations" (Idem). In other words, "social relations are always relations of power" (Idem).

The identity of elements is relational, which implies that the relational process that constitutes identity in the field of discursiveness is itself formed of power relations. Mutzenberg states that "every identity or object is constituted in the context of an action" (Mutzenberg, 2008: 209). If account is taken of the statements of Mutzenberg (2008) and Laclau (2008), it can be arguerd that identity is constituted in a political and interrelational manner. According to Marchart, "in summary, politics is found everywhere– although in small doses. However, "everywhere"is a peculiar place that nobody has ever seen" (Marchart, 2009: 230). This does not mean that everything is political but rather that meaning is political. And if meaning is constructed in a discursive field, the discourse is in essence political.

By Way of Conclusion

The discourse is constructed through social practices in the field of discursiveness. These practices are signified and re-signified by individuals in the relations that they establish in a determined social and historical context by endowing them with meanings, which

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are present and confirmed in a memory, which, in some way, comes to be spoken about. As Foucault (2006: 26) stated: "The new is not in what is said but in the event in its surroundings". Discourse is an articulatory practice that plays with a prohibition and in this process leaves a non-articulated "remainder", which struggles within the discursive field to subvert what already exists, while at the same time seeking a hegemony of meanings.

As a result, the work of the analyst seeks to address the question of "(...) how determined discourses are (re)produced, provide evidence of conflicts, reveal the inadequacy of these discourse, allow opportunities to emerge that were excluded and explain antagonisms" (Mutzenberg, 2008: 212). This suggests that the meanings are created in social and historical relations, when the individuals attempt to give significance to things, to what they do and their way of living. This process of significance is contingent, social, political and historical.

This is how we understand the way people give meaning to the world, which is constituted in a contingent form. In constructing the world in meaning, people allow it to be interwoven with social practices, language and the exercise of their own activities. Meanings are constructed in the relations that are established within a discursive field. And there is not a single, fixed or stable meaning, but meanings that dispute the dominance of the field of discursiveness. During this process, the articulation is a lively strategy in the struggle with other meanings. The reason for this is that hegemony in a field is not the result of a "harmony", consensus or even a convergence with the object in question. Rather, hegemonic action within a configuration or context allows a meaning to be provisionally fixed by the broadening of a particular meaning in the "play of differences" to the point of making sense of other discourses dispersed in the field of discursiveness. Setting out from this principle, the world is a political construction. Hence, Burity states that the DT

> (...) focuses on the way the constitution of social reality takes place at a given moment on the basis of a plurality of disputing discourses which reveal the possible (and impossible) conditions for the emergence of projects and models of society, organizations and collective action (Burity, 2007: 80).

Therefore, we are faced with a theory that, when it is understood and explained constructs reality, but far from seeing reality as an objective form or as "something given", seeks to analyse the production of meanings, their construction, resignification, conflicts and antagonisms. Fairclough states that "discourse is a practice not only of the representation of the world but of the signification of the world which constitutes and constructs the world in significance" (Fairclough, 2008: 91). Thus, discourse is action, representation, signification and the relation of people about the world and in the world with other people and those surrounding them.

DT is thus put forward to explain how, in what conditions and for what reasons the discourse was constructed changed or preserved. (Howarth, 2000), as well as to provide evidence of conflicts, reveal the inadequacy of the discourse and allow what was separated to emerge in a determinate discursive field (Mutzenberg, 2008).

When the discourses constructed about institutional assessment are analyzed as a social practice within the field of higher education, we are confronted with the need to understand how this field is being constructed within a space of struggle where discourses are articulated. Moreover, it has never been possible to achieve "the ultimate fixity of meaning", since something has always been left unarticulated, defeated, or silenced,

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although it is not destroyed and still remains "alive" in the field. This non-articulated 'remainder' is soon found to be redirected, reinterpreted, resignified and reactivated at another time, in face of the emergence of a new process of articulation.

In his analysis of discursive identities[8], Gomes states that "the phenomenon of higher education which is complex and heterogeneous in itself, should be understood from a standpoint which takes account of historical causality and social causality" (Gomes, 2006: 13). This means that understanding and explaining social practices (including the social practice of Institutional Assessment), requires us to view them as being historically situated in their contexts and relations in view of the relational character of the whole social practice. We understand that Institutional Assessment (thenceforth referred to as IA), will be subject to the same principles when it is carried out in an institution.

At the same time, Guadilla draws attention to the fact that institutional self-assessment in the context of reforms, compels institutions to obtain better results and requires them to adopt a new management style, "which involves telling organizations that they must acquire self-knowledge and learn how to regulate themselves so that they can become dynamic institutions" (Guadilla, 2002: 45). With regard to this, Guadilla (2002) stresses that it is the context of reform that explains the achievement of AI activities, and this confirms the view of Dias Sobrinho (2005) that there is a need for self-knowledge. Self-knowledge and self-regulation form a requirement of "the new management style" in the area of results and hence, is not an institutional need but an external requirement (Guadilla, 2002).

The conflict in the discursive field of AI lays emphasis on the political dimension in the face of polarized formative discourses/results, the process/product and the needs of the outside institution/demands. These discourses support interests, concepts and functions and cast doubt on the whole conception of a "university". In the case of higher education, the discourses that are produced incorporate issues such as the following: the use of exams, regulatory measures taken by the State, the quality of the schools, being accountable to the public for the work carried out by the educationalists, the re-accreditation and accreditation of the IES[9], and forms and standards of evaluation. In this area, as Morosini points out, this debate in the field of education, and in particular, in the field of higher education, is being prolonged "with ever-increasing intensity" (Morosini, 2004: 145).

As a discourse, assessment policies are constituted in the context of social practices and then constructed in the relations established in a given historical and social context. As a policy, it is the result of a combination of elements where a discourse "assumes the additional function of representing (…) everything, without completely renouncing its particularity" (Laclau, 2008: 349). The articulations and the struggles do not cease when the policies materialize in a text (as regulations); the reason for this is that when faced with the "text", people begin a process of signification that is present in its interpretation and it begins to be recreated in a vivid way. Ball states that

> practice involves much more than the sum of a wide range of policies and is usually invested with local and personal values. As such, it entails the resolution of (or a struggle with) contradictory expectations and requirements – agreements and subsequent adjustments become necessary (Ball apud Mainardes; Marcondes, 2009: 305).

People recreate the text in the light of social practices.

When it is understood that there is a conflict inside and throughout institutional assessment as a social practice within institutions, the Discourse Theory can be

understood as a possible analytical tool for this discursive field, where there is a belief that discourse should not be confined to language in the form of speech and writing. Rather, it analyses the meanings constructed about the social practice of institutional assessment by setting out from the principle that "there is no social reality outside signification or beyond meaning" (Marchart, 2009: 196-197). The Discourse Theory explores the discourses that are present in the discursive field, and struggles for the fixity of meaning within an institution, and the internal struggles in the sub-field of assessment; it not only seeks hegemony in the sub-field, but also hegemony in the field of higher education.

Notes

1. National Assessment of Basic Education; The National System of Higher Education Evaluation; and The Program for International Student Assessment (respectively).

2. Ministry of Education and Sport – Brazil.

3. Pinho and Sacramento (2009: 1345), have usually translated the word *accountability* as "responsabilização"[an acceptance of full responsibility] on the basis of the concept employed by Campos (1990), who uses the concept as a synonym for an objective responsibility or moral obligation to be answerable to somebody, and links the concept to democracy. "It is a synonym for objective responsibility – that is, it concerns the responsibility of a person or organization to another person outside itself. This responsibility has implications since it involves rewards for fulfilling an obligation and punishments when the opposite is found to be the case" (Ibidem: 1348).

4. Also considered to be non-discursive. We understand the term extra-discursive on the basis of the explanation offered by Žižek: "Intersubjective concrete space for symbolic communication is always structured by different (unconscious) textual devices which can be reduced to a secondary rhetoric" (Žižek, 2007: 16).

5. To illustrate the constitution of meaning, Laclau and Mouffe (1990: 116) discuss natural facts which are shown below in an example:

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"What we can say about about the natural world, about the facts of physics, biology or astronomy that are not apparently integrated in meaningful totalities constructed by men? The answer is that natural facts are also discursive facts.And they are so for the simple reason that the idea of nature is not something that is already there, to be read from the appearances of things but itself is the result of a slow and complex historical and social construction. To designate something as a natural object is a way of conceiving it which depends on a clasificatory system. However, this does not put into question the fact that this entity which we call a ¨stone¨ exists in the sense that it is present here and now, regardless of my will, notwithstanding the fact that being a ¨stone¨ depends on a mode of classifying objects that is historical and contingent".

6. According to Barrett, "Derrida elaborated a theory of language as an endless "play of signifiers", and a theory of linguistic meaning as being constructed through different links in a chain. The difference has begun to feature, in a broad range of modern social theories such as this approach to language and the sign of a rejection of absolute meaning or as Laclau and Mouffe describe it, an "ultimate fixity of meaning" (Barrett, 2007: 249).

7. Marchart states that: "A volcanic eruption can be interpreted as a natural phenomenon or as "the wrath of God" (Marchart, 2009: 199). However, in both cases, the global network of power relations (from the discourse of modern science or the system of beliefs within the Catholic Church) must already be functioning and instituted politically, to enable this interpretation to be successful.

8. In the text in question, the author does not analyse Institutional Assessment. Rather, he conducts an analysis of academic productions in the field of higher education by seeking "to analyse the origins and reasons that lead to this construction, together with the use and reproduction of discursive public/private and State/free market identities in the field of higher education, by arguing that there is agreement on their polarized and contradictory use." (Gomes, 2006: 13). Nonetheless, its conception of a discourse present in the text allows us to broaden its scope for this study.

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