

Does discourse construct our reality?

I'm sure most of us have been touched by some of the news stories over the last few days. The death of Michael Jackson has provoked a worldwide reaction and a reaction that many of us may not have expected, in that it has been so positive in remembering him for his talent. You may have seen one of the documentaries about Michael that ended with the words;

"How Michael Jackson will be remembered will depend on who tells the story".

This got me thinking about how we construct our reality of events through discussion, negotiation and discourse.

Another item of news that you may have seen was the description of the initial phase of demonstrations against the presidential election results in Iran. The BBC's correspondent, Jeremy Bowen, described how there were "*two narratives*" vying for supremacy through discourse. The official governmental line was that 'the elections were fair and democratic and the demonstrators were terrorists'. The narrative from the demonstrators was that 'the elections were rigged and they were fighting for the good of the country, to ensure Iran became a modern state free from the tyranny of a dictatorship'. Bowen suggested that, through debate, people were constructing their polarised versions of reality based on the narratives being proposed.

Gail Fairhurst, in her book 'Discursive Leadership', suggests that leadership is also constructed and negotiated. Her favourite definition of leadership is that;

"Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or actions are recognised by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems that are important to them".

Fairhurst suggests that this definition takes some thinking about. Firstly, she says, it acknowledges that leadership is a process of influence and meaning-making between people. She goes on to argue that, therefore,

- i) anyone can be a leader,
- ii) leadership is a process, not just about one way communication.

and iii) leadership is an attribution made by followers or observers. (Just because you have the title does not mean you are accepted as a leader.)

All of which raises some though provoking questions for us as individuals and leaders.

- Are we aware that our words, our discourses and actions are constantly being evaluated by others?
- Are we aware of how we come across to others?
- Are we aware of the way we make attributions?
- Do we actively seek feedback to increase our self awareness?

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