

# Everybody's Into Environmental Ed, Right? A Foucauldian Perspective

Paul Kolenick, University of Regina, Canada

## **Abstract**

*Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge is applied to an exploration of how managerial discourse affects the practice of public environmental education at a publicly owned electric utility. Emerging from interviews with people at SaskPower is a managerial discourse with a particularly instrumental approach to environmental education. The aim of those at the Corporation entrusted with the task of educating people about the environment and the energy industry is directed toward achieving what is described as an "educated" perspective—that is, a consensus among people on several questions about energy options for the future. Through Foucault's essay, "What is Enlightenment?", an alternative perspective on public environmental education is considered that is more collaborative, inclusive, and critically reflective.*

## **Résumé**

*Le concept du savoir-pouvoir de Michel Foucault, s'applique à une exploration du comment le discours de gestionnaires nuit au travail d'initiation du public à l'environnement, dans un service d'électricité de propriété publique. Ce qui se dégage des entrevues avec les responsables de la SaskPower, c'est un discours de gestionnaires proposant une approche instrumentale à l'initiation à l'environnement. L'objectif des gens de la Corporation chargés de sensibiliser la population à l'environnement et à l'industrie de l'énergie, vise à atteindre ce qui est décrit comme un point de vue « éducatif » – c'est-à-dire, un consensus général sur plusieurs questions qui traitent de la confluence énergétique pour l'avenir. La thèse de Foucault, « Qu'est-ce que les Lumières », face à une initiation du public à l'environnement, est un autre point de vue réputé être plus collaboratif, inclusif et autocritique.*

**Keywords:** (The) Enlightenment, managerial discourse, Michel Foucault, power/knowledge, public environmental education

## Introduction

Established as the Saskatchewan Power Commission in 1929, the provincial government of Saskatchewan converted the Commission in 1949 into a Crown corporation. The Saskatchewan Power Corporation (SaskPower) has

served the province for over 75 years, with the Environmental Programs department established in the early 1970s. At present, the Corporation is faced with environmental issues associated with the emission of greenhouse gases and the potential of new environmental regulations and emissions standards. At the same time, SaskPower faces the challenge of reducing its costs while maintaining reasonably affordable electricity rates for its customers. Further, it is expected that decisions will need to be made for the renewal or replacement of many of the Corporation's larger generation units in the years ahead. In response to these issues, the interest has been expressed at SaskPower in the development of programs to inform customers, regulators, and others about the energy options available for electrical generation in the province, such as coal, natural gas, and wind power.

The Environmental Programs department is at present part of the Planning, Environment and Regulatory Affairs division at SaskPower. The work of Environmental Programs is based essentially on three areas:

- Environmental Screening and Assessment, associated with environmental impacts resulting from the construction of new electrical facilities, such as transmission and distribution power lines,
- Environmental Risk Assessment, which involves the monitoring of regulated substances such as hydrocarbons or PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in soils, and
- Environmental Issues Management, with a focus on the Corporation's relations with customers and communities across the province of Saskatchewan.

My work with Environmental Issues Management over eight years beginning in the mid-1990s involved the development and implementation of environmental policies and the production of environmental reports, brochures, and other informational materials. Annual environmental reports are designed essentially to inform people of the Corporation's various initiatives with respect to protecting the environment. The environmental performance reports include indicators (for example, on the emissions of coal-fired power stations) as well as good news stories on the Corporation's environmental initiatives (SaskPower, 2008a). Brochures are used also to promote public awareness of the Corporation's efforts. A brochure on habitat offset management, for instance, highlights activities said to compensate for the ecological effects associated with the generation and delivery of electricity, such as the burning of coal at power stations or the altering of landscapes in the construction of transmission lines (SaskPower, 2008b).

## The Study of Discourse

As a former teacher, I inevitably had personal questions about the beliefs and assumptions I shared with others at SaskPower with responsibilities for public environmental education. This led to the writing of a doctoral thesis where I looked into the nature of public environmental education, set within the context of the energy industry. In particular, I applied Foucault's understanding of discourse and his concept of power/knowledge to the question of how a managerial discourse affects the practice of public environmental education. The question is raised then about the beliefs and assumptions, about the environment and about educating about the environment, of people at SaskPower entrusted with public environmental education as part of the management of environmental issues.

The study was based principally on the discourse found in the transcript of audio-taped interviews held with four select people at SaskPower, each representing a level on the managerial hierarchy in the Planning, Environment and Regulatory Affairs department. The investigation also included an exploration of the discourse found in the text of a transcript of 23 select others, with an interest in the environment and environmental education, from non-governmental organizations throughout the province of Saskatchewan, provincial and federal governmental agencies, and the University of Regina. This part of the transcript text offered critical and alternative discourses which encouraged SaskPower to take a more serious approach to energy conservation.

This article is based on the discourse of two of the interviewees at SaskPower, and their views as senior managers about public environmental education and how its practice could help with decision making on several issues of energy policy. The discourse of a third interviewee, from the group of non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, and the University of Regina, offers a critical perspective on the use of public environmental education by SaskPower and other organizations in the province.

In this investigation, discourse at SaskPower is conceived as wielding a certain influence or governance over those with responsibilities for the practice of public environmental education. The notion that people within organizations are governed or controlled by discourse is relatively new, but lends support to my question about the effects upon educational practice of the beliefs and assumptions of people at SaskPower with responsibilities for public environmental education. Foucault (1980) put it this way: "One doesn't have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person [i.e., a governmental agency or department] who can exercise it alone and totally over others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised" (p. 156). In other words, those who think they are in power are in effect subject to the exercise of that power. They too are shaped by the discourse. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) add to our understanding of discourse, particularly from an organi-

zational perspective, with what they refer to as “strategies without strategists” (p. 109). That is, strategic planning at SaskPower (which may include plans for public environmental education) are bound not by departmental will or design as much by the beliefs and assumptions engrained within the historical discourses in which those with responsibilities for public environmental education at SaskPower likely find themselves.

### Power/Knowledge

The concept of power/knowledge was central to Foucault’s work and is applicable to understanding the effect of managerial discourse at SaskPower upon the Corporation’s approach to public environmental education. Through power/knowledge, Foucault (1980) maintained that “the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (p. 52). The effect of power/knowledge, however, generally goes unnoticed. Hacking (1986) described Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge as “depth knowledge” and “depth power” (p. 31)—knowledge that tends to be taken for granted as common sense or as *the facts*, and power that no one really carries out in the conventional sense, yet that tends to take on a heightened sense of importance just the same. This is reminiscent of Hogan’s (1990) observation that knowledge, and particularly technology, is “more fundamentally to be understood as an *active mentality*, a way of revealing the world which highlights possibilities of a certain kind and obscures possibilities of other kinds” (p. 21). There is a considerable body of specialized knowledge shared among the biological sciences that has been developed through the study of ecosystems, for example, that provides a legitimate basis for the management of the Corporation’s environmental issues.

Yet an administrative knowledge has also accumulated that is reminiscent of what Said (1986) refers to as Foucault’s disciplinary society of an “unremitting and unstoppable expansion of power favouring the administrators, managers, and technocrats” (p. 150). This form of power is found in Foucault’s dual concepts of the *surveillance* of people, for example, through the use of polls, surveys, and questionnaires, and what he refers to as the *normalization* of bringing people to agreement or consensus, for instance, on issues of energy and the environment. Although Foucault had used these terms with reference to his historical studies of penal and psychiatric institutions (e.g., *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, 1975; *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1979), both concepts of surveillance and normalization are applicable to opinion-forming processes like deliberative polling.

In 2004, for example, Nova Scotia Power hosted a Customer Energy Forum based on deliberative polling. As the first deliberative poll held in Canada, the process began with random telephone calls to the utility’s cus-

tomers, who were given a questionnaire on electricity issues. Upon completion of the questionnaire, customers were invited to participate in the forum to consider the energy options available for the future of electricity in that province. The random sample of Nova Scotia Power customers, comprising a group of 135 people, met over a day and a half in small and larger group sessions, where they were presented with the opportunity to ask questions of panels composed of subject-matter experts and advocates for different resource options. At the end of it all, a second poll was taken with the original questions, and the conclusions of the consultants were reported. Consultants described the process as one that “samples informed [underlined in publication] opinion on an issue—in this case, options to meet the need for future [electrical] generation ... and reveals what participants feel about an issue having had a chance to read, think, discuss, and ask questions of experts and advocates” (Guild, Lehr, & Thomas, 2004, p. 6). As proponents of deliberative polling, Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell (2002) point out that while a conventional poll (i.e., a Gallup poll) is designed to show what people actually think about a set of issues, deliberative polling serves to narrow the gap between what they refer to as actual public opinion and a well-informed public: “A Deliberative Poll is designed to show what the public *would* think about the issues, if it thought more earnestly and had more information about them” (p. 458). Underlying this process, however, is an empiricist faith in an opinion-forming process aimed at improving the knowledge level of people with regard to a specific area of interest, such as the options available for energy production in the near future.

Proponents of deliberative polling claim that this process is inherently democratic. Fishkin and Luskin (2004), for example, liken deliberative polling to the democratic process reminiscent of the polis of ancient Athens, “where deliberative microcosms of several hundred chosen by lot made many key decisions” (p. 7). In a similar fashion, Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell (2002) point to George Gallup, credited with developing public opinion polling in the late 1930s, who observed that, “it [polling] would restore the democracy of the New England town meeting to the large nation-state” whereby citizens would gather together to “make and hear arguments for and against various proposals, and vote them up or down” (p. 456). This notion, however, of transporting the ideal of a small town meeting into a much larger and perhaps more complex societal context is questionable. While portrayed as immanently democratic by its proponents, deliberative polling is marked by a formulaic process that does not seem suited to the promotion of participative democracy. In practice, deliberative polling is meant to produce measurable results (i.e., changes in opinion) in people who are viewed as objects or samples suitable for study (and management).

## A Managerial Perspective on Public Environmental Education

The transcript text of two select interviewees at SaskPower is considered in light of the question of how beliefs and assumptions about education affect the practice of public environmental education. The discourse of the two SaskPower interviewees is reflective of an interest expressed at the Crown Corporation in public environmental education as a way of informing people (e.g., customers, non-governmental agencies, and governmental regulators) about the regulatory and economic pressures faced by the Corporation in maintaining a supply of electrical energy for the province of Saskatchewan. The transcript text of one interviewee, in particular, from the group of non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, and the University of Regina, is also included in this article, which offers a critical perspective on the practice of public environmental education.

Over the next decade, the Corporation anticipates having to make decisions that concern about 2,000 megawatts of generation—a significant portion of its present net generating capacity of approximately 3,500 megawatts. Armstrong (2005) indicates, for example, that SaskPower is looking to retire the first two units of its oldest coal-fired power station in the near future, which means that supply replacement decisions will have to be made. This concern was expressed by an interviewee at SaskPower:

In the next 10-12 years, SaskPower will likely make roughly 2,000 megawatts of supply decisions, dealing with new supply requirements for load growth, dealing with mid-life unit refurbishment of existing units, and the need to replace units that will be retired. We need to make all those decisions by roughly 2015 in order that over the next 20 years these things will be fully implemented. Those 2,000 megawatts of decisions, depending on how they go, will cause us to spend anywhere from probably two to perhaps as much as eight billion dollars. In Saskatchewan-speak that's lots of money. So, you don't want to get it wrong. (Interviewee A, SaskPower)

The high-stakes process of refurbishing or replacing power-generating facilities provides managers at SaskPower with a compelling interest to inform people in Saskatchewan with an interest in energy options (e.g., governmental regulators, non-governmental organizations, customers) of the issues associated with choosing one energy option or the other. In that light, this interviewee points out that the public needs to be given the facts so that they can make informed decisions, or at least understand and accept the decisions made on their behalf.

All of this stuff is really about what the public wants. There is a bit of a problem some say with "chicken and egg" because the public doesn't know what it wants yet, so we have to tell them what they want. I think what you need to tell them is what the facts are and they'll have to decide what they want. ... And if you have to have a passionate, but hopefully informed debate to get to the bottom of things, let's have at it because if as a society we want clean power

stacks, and society says, “I value that enough to pay whatever that takes”—good, we’ve got a fix for you. If, on the other hand, they say, “well, I don’t know if I want to pay for that, but I’m willing to pay for half a clean stack”—okay, fair enough, you get what you get. (Interviewee A, SaskPower)

Central to this decision-making process is what the interviewee refers to as “the facts.” As Callicott (1999) suggests, this preoccupation with facts is part of the scientific legacy of the Enlightenment where “facts are objective and concrete—out there for everybody to see and for everybody to see the same way” (p. 79). The perceived importance of informing people of the costs and regulatory concerns associated with the energy business is illustrated further, however, by a second interviewee at SaskPower, who emphasizes the need to explain to customers the rationale underlying the Corporation’s plans for the future.

Ultimately we want to do the best job possible to serve our customers. That is, they understand what it is we’re trying to do and why we’re going about our business in a particular way. We’re part of the community, but we’re the ones with the knowledge of what you can and can’t do. So, the onus is on us to convey that to the public so that they understand why it is that we ask for rate increases, why it is that we want to build a coal plant rather than a nuclear plant, why it is that we’re not building another hydroelectric station. (Interviewee B, SaskPower)

In this passage, public environmental education (if we can call it that) is conceived as a one-way process of disseminating information, with little room left for questioning and discussion. Levin (2001) observes that the more committed a government or governmental agency is to a course of action, the less inclined it is to look seriously at changing plans in response to different criticisms. In this instance, education is viewed as a means of forming consensus or agreement, and the end result or outcome of this communicative process is referred to by this interviewee as an “educated” perspective—that is, a perspective of agreement or a shared worldview:

If we ask people what they think about a particular project, we need to be able to listen to them. But what they’ll tell us is absolutely what they feel. And it may not be from an educated perspective. So, the onus is on us to say to people that they need to understand this is what we can do, this is what we can’t do. Once you’ve “educated” [emphasis of interviewee] them a little bit, then you can get a reasonable consensus. (Interviewee B, SaskPower)

The question is raised in this passage about the interests and intentions of the interviewee in listening to what people have to say, for example, about the construction of new power stations. Listening as an aspect of educational leadership might be conceived as a means of assessing the knowledge level of people only to inform them of the costs, regulatory concerns, and other issues associated with a variety of energy options, for example, so that they may become more receptive to the Corporation’s plans. Murphy

(2007) puts it this way: “When leaders believe that they possess—or should possess—all the important information and knowledge, they do not see listening to others as essential” (p. 57). Achieving consensus among the Corporation’s customers is viewed as a priority. In achieving consensus, however, disagreement is seen as a problem to be overcome by providing people with information, or the facts.

Public environmental education is seen generally in operational terms. That is, *what can it do for us? How can it smooth the way for the construction of new generating facilities?* A fundamental problem is identified by an interviewee of the non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, and the University of Regina, who points out in critique that public environmental education is viewed instrumentally not only at SaskPower, but generally across industries, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations, among others. The problem is raised, however, about the need for an educational process that moves beyond narrow interests.

In Saskatchewan, we’ve a whole bunch of people, or organizations, doing it. Everybody’s into “Environmental Ed,” right? Government and different departments, SaskPower, universities, and all the NGOs have a role in environmental education. There’s a lot of self-interest here. ... Environmental groups have an agenda, where it’s to raise money, attract members, and other things. Industry groups, they have an agenda. Where is it that the individual can turn to for truly objective, quality information that has depth to it, that is not just related to the technical stuff, and that is not just related to pieces of the picture? (Interviewee C, Governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, University of Regina)

The point is made in this passage that public environmental education is too often used as a means to promote narrow institutional interests, whether at SaskPower or at other agencies and organizations. In that light, this interviewee describes the need for “truly objective information” in observing how the practice of public environmental education has changed over the past 10-15 years:

About 10 years ago, in terms of public education, the focus was largely on resource-based issues, and simple environmental stuff like recycling, the protection of habitat, and things like that. What has happened over time is that the context for environmental decision-making has radically changed. ... Economic relationships between countries are having a dramatic effect in ways that are making individual decision-making very complex. In the past, I think decision-making around environmental issues was largely about personal ethics and economics ... Now, the complexity of decision-making in areas like agriculture and forestry is affected by trade tariffs, for example, in a way that makes it hard for people to make sense of it all. (Interviewee C, Governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, University of Regina)



Although it is questionable whether truly objective information (as this interviewee puts it) can ever be attained, there is a need for a broader and more inclusive approach to public environmental education. The choices made by individual farmers, for example, are driven increasingly by international markets and trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement. The need is expressed then for an educational process that looks beyond the narrow interests of corporations, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other organizations. In that regard, the view taken by Foucault on the value of an inclusive, critically reflective perspective is particularly instructive.

### What Does Foucault Say to Environmental Educators?

It has been suggested by some that time is running out for a modern era that had its beginnings with the explorations of the globe by Europeans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the advances of a distinctively scientific, mechanistic, and commercialized worldview of unlimited material progress that has dominated western society (and the rest of the world) for several hundred years (Caldwell, 1990; Capra, 1994). Within that span of history, the Enlightenment era of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is perhaps most significant in that “traditional ways of thinking were subjected to more insistent criticism than before” (Mautner, 2000, p. 167). Foucault (1984) raised this point in a short essay “What is Enlightenment?”, which focused on the work of Kant and the role of critique as a way of transcending the discursive limits imposed on us by history, as “the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era” (p. 42).

Foucault (1984) raised the question: what is Enlightenment? Historically, he defines it as “the age of the critique” (p. 38). Long before the Enlightenment, however, the ancient Greeks considered two forms of human action. According to Carr (1987), there was *poiesis*, which is described as action directed toward an outcome of bringing some specific product into existence (e.g., a generating station). As *poiesis* is an object known prior to action, it is guided by a form of knowledge that Aristotle called *techne*, or what we now refer to as technological knowledge or expertise. Carr describes, however, a second form of human action known commonly as *praxis*. Although *praxis* is also action directed toward an outcome, it differs from *poiesis* in that its purpose is not to produce an object but to realize some morally worthwhile good.

In *praxis*, the aim is not in determining *how* to do something, but on deciding what *ought* to be done. That is, the purpose of *praxis* is not in resolving technical problems for which there is a correct answer. Instead, as Carr (1987) puts it, *praxis* “is a way of resolving those moral dilemmas which occur when different ethically desirable ends entail different, and perhaps incompatible courses of action” (p. 171). In my study, several interviewees talked about an inherent conflict between our economic system and the natural

world. One interviewee of the non-governmental organizations pointed out that people often talk about “survival” in terms of a standard of living and the effect of economic pressures such as the price of gasoline used to power automobiles. It was suggested, however, that there is a second level of survival considered less often—that is, whether the earth’s ecosystems in the long-term will be capable of sustaining life on the planet.

The shift that is required from a dominant, economically orientated understanding of survival, or perhaps sustainability, to a more ecologically-inclined, relational, and inclusive understanding of the world we inhabit is a fundamental task facing public environmental educators. This is a question of praxis, which requires that people deliberate upon what ought to be done as opposed to what can and cannot be done through some technological “know-how” with respect, for example, to the options available for energy production in the future. What is needed is a more collaborative, inclusive, and critically reflective approach to public environmental education that questions, for example, the need to produce more electrical energy. In that light, Foucault (1984) referred to Kant’s view of the Enlightenment as requiring a *Wahlspruch*, “a heraldic device,” which he described as “a distinctive feature by which one can be recognized, and it is also a motto, an instruction that one gives oneself and proposes to others. ... ‘dare to know,’ ‘have the courage, the audacity, to know’” (p. 35). Foucault further defined Enlightenment then as “a process in which men [and women] participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally” (p. 35). Through Foucault, I am reminded of Arendt (1958), who looked to the polis of the ancient Greeks as not simply the city-state in its physical location, but as an “organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (p. 198). In that sense, the Enlightenment is about much more than the application of *techne* toward achieving certain outcomes, such as the formation of public opinion on issues of energy options through processes like deliberative polling.

Foucault understood the relation between power and knowledge—not as informational programs based essentially on the imposition of privileged knowledge upon others, but as a network for collective and critical reflection upon the historically generated discourses in which we find ourselves. It is through this coming together of people, as a form of power in itself, where a critical perspective takes shape. In his histories, Foucault (1981) saw that “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (p.101). In Foucault’s understanding of discourse, there is an element then of social critique that lends itself perhaps to a sense of optimism and social change. Through critique there is the potential for a reflective examination of our beliefs and assumptions about public environmental education. In this way, Foucault has much to offer environmental educators.

## Notes on Contributor

**Paul Kolenick** is a former middle years/high school teacher who worked at SaskPower in the area of Environmental Policy and Issues Management. Having completed his Doctor of Education degree at the University of British Columbia in 2006, he is presently teaching at the University of Regina. **Contact:** Faculty of Education, University of Regina, 3737 Wascana Parkway, Regina, Saskatchewan, S4S 0A2, Canada; paul.kolenick@uregina.ca

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