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**How Transcription is Taken for Granted: An Analysis of Transcription in Doctoral Theses  
in Education**

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## **How Transcription is Taken for Granted: An analysis of Transcription in Doctoral Theses in Education**

The literature on transcription over three decades asserts the taken-for-granted nature of transcription in research. Most recently, it has been claimed that transcription is neglected in doctoral training of qualitative researchers yet there are few empirical studies of transcription in postgraduate work. The article reports a pilot study of transcription in doctoral research in Australia. Specifically, the study employed content analysis to examine how transcription was addressed in twenty doctoral theses informed by phenomenography, critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis or grounded theory. Discussion considers how transcription was addressed across studies and within the particular methodologies. The study suggests the need for increased attention to transcription especially in the reporting of doctoral research.

### **Objectives**

Analysis of transcripts is central to the work of many researchers in qualitative inquiry in education. Yet the research literature on transcription is replete with claims from qualitative researchers about the taken-for-granted nature of transcription (Bird, 2005; Duranti, 2007; Kvale, 1996; Lapadat, 2000; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Tilley, 2003a, 2003b; Tilley & Powick, 2002). Specifically, it is claimed that transcription is under-discussed in journal publications (Wellard & McKenna, 2001), in methods texts about qualitative inquiry (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006), in written reports of qualitative research (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999) and in post graduate research training (Bird, 2005; Lapadat and Lindsay, 1998).

What is taken-for-granted then about transcription in qualitative inquiry? In the literature, it is asserted that many researchers do not make their position on the nature of transcription clear, to themselves or to others (Lapadat, 2000). This omission occurs in the design of research and in its reporting. It is claimed that many researchers do not understand, or make clear, the relationship between theoretical and methodological perspectives and the development of transcripts (Coates & Thornborrow, 1999; Oliver et al., 2005). Further, overlooking this relationship has implications for analysis, findings and trustworthiness of studies (Easton, McComish & Greenburg, 2000).

Clearly, claims concerning the taken-for-granted nature of transcription in research suggest implications for qualitative inquiry in education; this is particularly so since transcripts of interviews and classroom interactions are central to numerous methodologies used in the conduct of education research. However, the transcription literature also points to the lack of empirical studies of transcription and transcription practices (Lapadat, 2000; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1998; Maclean, Myer & Estable, 2004; Wellard and McKenna, 2001). Oliver et al. (2005) assert that transcription is neglected in *certain* methodological approaches and not in others.

This paper reports a pilot study that examined how doctoral students in education reported transcription as an aspect of their postgraduate research. The study sought to address claims in the extant literature on transcription that it is taken-for-granted in reports of research. The central research question was “How do doctoral students account for transcription and transcripts in their theses?”. The study aimed to contribute understandings of the transcription process in qualitative research. On the basis of our content analysis, we establish how doctoral students addressed transcription and we argue that transcription was taken for granted in various ways.

### **Perspectives or theoretical framework**

Claims about the taken-for-granted nature of transcription are located as far back as the seminal work of Ochs (1979). In relation to child language studies, Ochs asserted the importance of a basic and shared notation system, the need to consider power relations inherent in representing the talk of adults and children, and the need for a close fit between the theoretical and methodological studies that inform a study and the approach to transcription that is used. Specifically, Ochs claimed that it was harder to address the goals of a study if the approach to transcription was left implicit and if it was not coherent with other aspects of research design. Although Ochs put transcription matters on the table thirty years ago, her claims stand unrefuted today (Duranti, 2007); a persistent theme in the extant literature about transcription remains that it is taken for granted (Author A, 2009).

Transcription is an interpretive process whereby transcribers make choices about what to record (Kvale, 1996). Choices are integrally related to theoretical positions and how researchers locate themselves and others in the research process (Jaffe, 2007). Making choices or being selective is a necessity (Cook, 1990; Duranti, 1997) since it is impossible to record all aspects of recordings or interactions. A transcript that attempted to record all aspects of recordings would be unwieldy and difficult to read. An understanding related to selectivity is that transcription is a representational process (Bucholtz, 2000; Green et al., 1997). Further, transcription is understood to reflect theory and to shape it (Du Bois, 1991) as researchers “reflexively document and affirm theoretical positions” (Mischler, 1991, p. 271) during the process of transcription and analysis. Although researchers provide differing definitions of transcription (see for example, Duranti, 2007; Green, Franquiz, & Dixon, 1997; Jaffe, 2000; Mondada, 2007; Ochs, 1979), the literature shows increasing agreement on these aspects of transcription (Baker, 1997).

Recent reviews of transcription in qualitative research highlight the importance of addressing transcription in reports of qualitative studies (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Author, 2009). Lapadat (2000) asserts that:

transcription decisions and processes employed during data collection and analysis need to be explained clearly and thoroughly in the write-up. When standardized procedures are used, a few words will suffice, but when researchers contextualize

and negotiate method as a means of interpretive seeing, there is no shortcut to explicit description. (Lapadat, 2000, p. 217).

According to Duranti (2007), many qualitative researchers develop their own hybrid approaches to transcription so it would appear that transcription needs to be thoroughly documented and explained.

### **Modes of inquiry**

The study employed content analysis, a method for managing and analysing data in qualitative studies. Lankshear and Knobel (2006, p. 334) suggest that qualitative content analysis is a useful tool for comparing a number of texts, either of the same type or across a period of time. Content analysis can tell us what is in the text and also highlight any “oversights” by the author/s of the text, thus allowing certain inferences to be made (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006, p. 332). The approach was judged appropriate for our study which encompassed a data set comprised of a number of theses. Content analysis enabled us to ask the same questions of the content of each manuscript although differing methodological and epistemological paradigms had been employed by researchers. The use of content analysis also enabled us to address an ethical dilemma about how we were to use this data and provide evidence. For confidentiality reasons we did not want to directly quote from the individual manuscripts but rather use de-identified and aggregated data. Content analysis can provide a mechanism for thematic development where sometimes the themes are inspired by a set of theoretical ideas generated and/or applied by the analyst (Gomm, 2004).

A recurring theme in content analysis is whether the analysis should be limited to the manifest content (elements physically present and countable) or extended to include latent content (Berg, 2004, p. 269). Kohlbacker (2006) highlights the added advantage of exploring both the manifest and latent content of the text. The inclusion of latent content enables a way of exploring the unspoken and expressive (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 32) where texts and artefacts can provide an insight into the actions, norms and intentions of a cultural group. If we consider the doctoral researcher as belonging to a particular cultural group then by looking at what is missing within the doctoral thesis an insight into the thinking around transcript production can be developed. For example some methodological framings would lead to the explicit use of transcripts while others tend to have a more implicit approach to the representation of data. Therefore transcription practices may reflect disciplines in the way that specific data is presented and therefore available for content analysis (Luebs, 1996).

The unit of analysis is the first decision that researchers employing content analysis need to make (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). This unit may take various forms that can extend from a program or classroom (Mertens, 1998) to words or phrases within a transcript (Feeley & Gottlieb, 1998). Lankshear and Knobel (2006, p. 335) advocate definitional content analysis “where the unit of analysis remains at the word level, but the researcher is also interested in

reading the text on either side of the focus word or phrase”. In our study the unit of analysis was “transcription”. Variants of the term included “transcript”, “transcript notation” and “transcribed”. This combination of elements (Berg, 2004, p. 274) enabled us to look for particular words such as ‘transcript’, certain items such as the inclusion of transcripts in the appendix or in the body of analysis chapters, the naming of a notation system used for transcribing and whether any issues regarding transcription were raised by the researcher.

### **Data sources, evidence, objects or materials**

Twenty doctoral theses were examined. These were selected from the online Australian Digital Theses Program database. Criteria for selection included: PhD degree awarded between 1998 and 2008 from a Faculty or School of Education; used transcripts of interviews or other interactions; a research design informed by conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, grounded theory or phenomenography. As well, we tried to obtain a spread of theses across Australian universities and supervisors. Five theses were selected for each research approach (and it was challenging to find the number of theses to fit all the criteria listed above). Each thesis was assigned a code for identification (for example CA1 referred to the first of five theses that employed conversation analysis).

The following broad procedure for analysis was employed:

Step 1: read through each thesis marking relevant content initially by looking at the table of contents, methodology chapters and appendices.

Step 2: when looking at “transcription” a decision was also made about what else might require coding from the accompanying phrases on either side of the unit of analysis

Step 3: a content summary sheet was developed and used to record information from each theses

Step 4: revisited the chunks of data on summary sheets as definitions were refined and reiterated

Step 5: interpreted results across all theses and within the four methodologies.

In the development and reporting of our study we have negotiated and addressed common limitations often cited with the use of content analysis. These include: over-extended inferences, possibly disregarding the purpose of the text or over-reduction of data.

### **Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/points of view**

Consideration and discussion of findings addresses methods used by students to account for transcription. Here we provide brief discussion of just two aspects to illustrate: description of transcription as seamless activity and use of the transcription literature.

Overall, researchers in the study did not raise and discuss issues or challenges related to transcription. That is, transcription was presented as straightforward, unproblematic and

unremarkable. This is interesting given the literature which extrapolates many of the complexities of producing transcripts. Use of the word “verbatim” was one method for presenting transcription as straightforward and accurate. Reference to “member checking” was also used to imply attention to correctness or accuracy in transcript development. Even in conversation analysis, where transcripts received a lot of attention, transcription was not always presented or discussed as a complex practice involving selectivity and issues to do with representation.

While the analysis shows some differences in how transcription was addressed across methodologies, it was the literature on transcription that was remarkably taken-for-granted in doctoral research across all theses. Although researchers methodically showed their understandings of the research process in relation to interview conduct and procedures by citing relevant literature, they did not give this same attention to transcription. Few researchers cited the seminal work by Ochs, and none cited recent transcription literature from journals that address qualitative inquiry and methods (see for example, Bird, 2005; Grundy, Pollon, & McGinn, 2003; Lapadat, & Lindsay, 1999; Poland, 1995; Tilley, 2003a, Tilley, 2003b).

### **Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work**

There are numerous claims made in the literature about the ways that transcription is taken for granted in qualitative inquiry. Few of these claims have been substantiated in empirical studies of transcription. In this paper we provide a pilot study of accounts of transcription provided by a small number of doctoral students in their theses. The study confirms that transcription was taken for granted in a number of ways within research informed by particular methodologies and across all studies in the data in other ways. The study suggests the need for greater attention to transcription in the reporting of doctoral research, and for more empirical studies to examine this aspect of reporting of qualitative research especially as it is addressed within particular methodologies.

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