

From package to practice: Examining the ad hoc in a state-wide early literacy program

Paper presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 9-13, Chicago, USA

**Dr Christina Davidson
Central Queensland University
Australia**

From package to practice: Examining the ad hoc in a state-wide early literacy program

Australian Commonwealth Government policies have promoted state literacy initiatives that prioritize systematic literacy instruction in the early years. This paper examines social interaction in a lesson informed by a state literacy program intended to meet national standards for early literacy. Conversation Analysis is used to develop descriptions of interaction methods used during an independent writing lesson. Descriptions encompass a question-question sequence of turns that occurred when individual students asked their teacher how to write a word. Discussion establishes that methods are compatible with the strategies mandated by the program but are not encompassed within its description of independent writing. It is argued that such programs need to acknowledge the moment-by-moment ways that teachers and students accomplish their daily literacy lessons.

Objective or Purpose

The Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) is a state literacy program in Victoria, Australia. Initially it was developed for Grade Prep, Grade One and Grade Two. These form the first three years of schooling in the state. The program focused on “re-designing schools” (Hill & Crévola, 1999) and was intended to meet standards for early literacy instruction established by the Australian Commonwealth Government (DEET, 1998; Hill & Crévola, 1997). The Success for All program (Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Livermon, & Dolan, 1990) in the US informed the development of the EYLP.

The EYLP was designed as a whole-school approach to literacy instruction (Department of Education, Vic., 1998a). It was informed primarily by teacher and school effectiveness studies, specifically those involving whole-school approaches. The latter establish gains in literacy attainment “within the context of a fully implemented, comprehensive program that is results-driven” (Crévola & Hill, 1998, p. 5). The incorporation of effectiveness studies reflects an international trend in literacy education that has increasingly given prominence to teacher effectiveness, school effectiveness and school improvement research (Reynolds, 1998).

Central to the EYLP is a systematic approach to classroom instruction. The program requires that teachers implement a two hour daily literacy block. Teachers determine the teaching focus for individual lessons but time allocation, classroom grouping, teaching strategies and assessment are mandated. Teaching strategies used in the program were drawn from progressive approaches implemented in the state during the 1980s, however, the program requires their systematic application rather than the “ad hoc” use that typified their previous application (Hill & Crévola, 1999).

The intention of this paper is to establish that while the EYLP mandates a highly structured and systematic approach to literacy teaching (Hill & Crévola, 1999), the daily classroom application of the program is constituted by the ad-hoc interactive work of teachers and students. The broader argument is that while mandated literacy programs delineate what should occur in literacy lessons, understandings of programs need to encompass the moment-by-moment social activity of teachers and students.

Perspective or Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (henceforth EM and CA). These related research approaches maintain an interest in the local and situated social practices of people (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). They commonly give analytic focus to ordinary events through the analysis of naturally occurring talk and interaction (Pomerantz, 1988).

Conversation Analysis examines people's interaction in order to understand “how conduct, practice, or praxis, in whatever form, is accomplished” (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997, p. 65) during everyday activity. Central to understanding conduct is the explication of procedures or “shared methods interactants use to produce and recognize their own and other people’s conduct.” (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997, p. 69). These methods accomplish the course of social interaction and indicate how people orient to aspects of settings (Schegloff, 1992).

When applied to classrooms Conversation Analysis results in detailed descriptions of interaction that accomplishes social activity in situ. The CA perspective on the relationship between descriptions of classroom practice and theories of instruction has been formulated in this way:

That classroom teaching is relentlessly ad hoc should not be understood in opposition to more tidy formulations of professional practice. Instructional plans and curricular objectives are real enough. The greater point is that they own their classroom lives to the practiced production and negotiation of the moment-to-moment possibilities that every next enactment of classroom teaching and learning assures. Thus the ad hoc, rather than an oppositional formulation of professional practice is its praxiological life. (Macbeth, 2003, p. 25)

The CA perspective enables the explication of the “praxiological life” (Macbeth, 2003, p. 25) of classroom approaches and theories that inform them. It does this through the analysis of naturally occurring talk and interaction.

Methods, techniques or modes of inquiry

This paper draws on the analysis of an independent writing lesson in a Grade Prep/ Grade One classroom informed by the EYLP. According to the program, independent writing is a time when students pursue their own writing or complete writing tasks set by the teacher. Independent writing is informed by previous instruction that supports students to problem solve independently (Department of Educ., Vic, 1998a). Independent writing must occur daily during an hour of writing instruction. Independent writing follows a whole-class teacher directed session that lasts for 10-15 minutes.

In the lesson analysed for this study, the teacher had conducted a shared writing session based on a previous classroom experience where the students had made peanut butter and jam (or jelly) sandwiches. Students were asked to write their own accounts of the experience during independent writing. Audio and video recordings were made of students seated at one table.

The recordings were reviewed many views, a transcript developed using Jefferson notion (Atkinson & Heritage, 1999) and analyses of sequences of interaction conducted using CA. Choice of sequences for analysis was guided by the apparent orientations of students. For example, a number of children approached the teacher for help and so those sequences were selected for analysis.

Data sources or evidence

The sequences of talk all begin with a student asking the teacher how to record a specific word. Interactions with the teacher usually began with a direct question such as “how do you write *something*” or “how do you spell *something*”. All sequences of this kind were analysed and a description developed that took account of every sequence. Excerpts cited in this proposal are representative of the analysis and illustrate how the teacher interacted with students to bring about two actions that she required of students: that they sound the word out by starting with its first sound or that they find the word in the room.

What does it start with?

In this sequence of interaction the teacher avoided providing an answer by asking a question (3) that required that Wayne work out and name the first letter of ‘like’ for himself.

- | | | | |
|---|---|----------|---|
| 1 | → | Wayne: | how do you write (0.4) like? |
| 2 | | | ((Mckielia begins to write ‘e’)) |
| 3 | → | Teacher: | like ((leans over Wayne)) what does like start with? |
| 4 | | | ((Mckielia looks at Dominic’s work/teacher notices Mckielia)) |
| 5 | → | Wayne: | (0.8) um (0.4) a [‘c’* (looking at the teacher)] |
| 6 | | Dominic: | [ca*n I write (eleven) sentences |
| 7 | | Teacher: | (0.2) yeah write me another sentence! (0.8) |

Wayne’s response was hesitant and overlapped by the talk of another student who directed a question at the teacher. The teacher did not respond to Wayne’s utterance (5) although it was “hearable” as tentative and requiring confirmation from her.

Where can you find it?

The teacher’s use of a question in response to a question enabled her to project students towards particular trajectories or actions. Sometimes this required that students “find” words.

- | | | |
|---|----------|---|
| → | Dina: | how do you write peanut butter? |
| → | Teacher: | where are you going to find peanut butter?, |
| | Ivan: | the supermarket () |

The teacher’s turn was designed (Austin, *et al.*, 2003) to withhold information requested and to make apparent a way to find the information that was needed. The use of a question withheld the answer that the student’s question required. At the same time, by asking where the word could be found the teacher was heard to *make apparent* that the

word *was* “findable” somewhere in the room. Ivan’s turn “made strange” talk of finding ‘peanut butter’ in the classroom by providing the ‘real-world’ answer to the question.

Overall, the analysis of a number of sequences is used in the paper to build a robust description of all the sequences of this type. Description is then related to the social activity of the students and teacher during independent writing.

Results and/or conclusions/point of view

This study establishes some of the ways in which one teacher and her students accomplished independent writing during a literacy lesson. Since two strategies mandated within the EYLP are that students should learn to sound words out and to find them in the room, the teacher’s actions during the independent writing lesson were consistent with this. However, the analysis reveals details of activity that are not encompassed within the program’s “tidy formulations” (Macbeth, 2003) of systematic instruction.

In order to get students to find words or sound them out, the teacher regularly withheld the provision of the specific information requested by students: their questions were answered with questions. The teacher also withheld responses to students if they answered her questions. Since teachers regularly comment on the “suitability” of students’ answers during whole-class instruction (Mehan, 1979), the frequent omission of this turn during independent writing suggests that the teacher required independent action by students rather than further interaction with her.

While the analysis reveals the methodical aspects of teacher activity that fitted with the mandated program, it also shows the way in which the teacher’s direction of students took account of the specific context. That is, the teacher’s response to individual requests varies. While some students were required to find a word, others were directed to sound a word out. This differentiation illustrates aspects of teachers’ activity that are overlooked in the EYLP and is possibly illustrative of the work that many teachers do in literacy lessons informed by mandated programs. Students were directed to sound out or find words according to their teacher’s assessment on-the-go of what individual students *could do* to write the word they needed.

The analysis illustrates that students and teachers together negotiate the “moment-to-moment possibilities” that accomplish teaching and learning in the classroom (Macbeth, 2003). While the EYLP provides detailed directions for teachers as to the conduct of independent writing, it does not take account of student initiated talk with the teacher. Independent writing is described solely in terms of what teachers should do when they approach individual students. The matter of student initiated activity is not addressed.

Educational or scientific importance of this study

The strategies of sounding out and finding a word are well documented as ways that teachers develop independence in young writers long before they are able to record the spelling of words accurately (Geekie, Cambourne & Fitzsimmons, 1999; Cambourne & Turbill, 1987; Cambourne 1988). This paper contributes understandings of how a teacher

and students accomplish orientations to these strategies, and to independent activity, within a program that intends systematic instruction. This knowledge is overlooked in “packaged” literacy programs that attribute successful instruction to “steps” that all teachers are required to follow.

The application of ethnomethodology and CA to the analysis of the social accomplishment of independent writing illustrates ways that detailed studies of everyday activity in the classroom can inform how we understand the institutional activity of lessons (Heap, 1997; Macbeth, 2003). While programs like the EYLP seek to control variation within classrooms, this study reminds that lessons are social encounters negotiated by talk and interaction.

References

- Atkinson, J. M., & Heritage, J. (1999). Jefferson's transcript notation. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader* (pp. 158-166). London; New York: Routledge.
- Cambourne, B. (1988). *The whole story: Natural learning and the acquisition of literacy in the classroom*. Sydney: Ashton Scholastic.
- Cambourne, B., & Turbill, J. (1987). *Coping with chaos*. Rozelle, NSW: Primary English Teaching Association.
- Crévola, C. A., & Hill, P. (1998). *Class: Children's literacy success strategy: An overview*. East Melbourne: Catholic Education Office.
- Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. (1998). *Literacy for all: The challenge for Australian schools*. Canberra: DEETYA.
- Department of Education Victoria. (1998a). *Teaching writers in the classroom: Stage 2 Early Years Literacy Program*. South Melbourne, Vic: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Geekie, P., Cambourne, B., & Fitzsimmons, P. (1999). *Understanding literacy development*. Oakhill, Eng: Trentham.
- Goodwin, C., & Duranti, A. (1992). Rethinking context: An introduction. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp. 1-41). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heap, J. (1997). Conversation analysis methods in researching language and education. In N. H. Hornberger & D. Corson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education, Volume 8: Research methods in language and education*. (pp. 217-225). The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Heap, J. (2000). The boundaries of writing: Paying attention to the local educational order. In S. Hester & D. Francis (Eds.), *Local educational order: Ethnomethodological studies of knowledge in action* (pp. 73-90). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Hill, P., & Crévola, C. A. (1997). *The literacy challenge in Australian primary schools*. Jolimont, Vic: The Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria.
- Hill, P. W., & Crévola, C. A. (1999). Key features of a whole-school design approach to literacy teaching in schools. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities, 4*, 5-11.

- Macbeth, D. (2003). Hugh Mehan's Learning Lessons reconsidered: On the differences between the naturalistic and critical analysis of classroom discourse. *American Educational Research Journal*, *Spring*, 239-280.
- Mehan, H. (1979). *Learning lessons: Social organization in the classroom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pomerantz, A. (1988). Offering a candidate answer: An information seeking strategy. *Communication Monographs*, *55*, 360-373.
- Pomerantz, A., & Fehr, B. J. (1997). Conversation analysis: An approach to the study of social interaction as sense making practices. In T. A. Van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (pp. 64-91). London: SAGE.
- Reynolds, D. (1998). Schooling for literacy: A review of research on teacher effectiveness and school effectiveness and its implications for contemporary educational policies. *Education Review*, *50*, 147-162.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1992). On talk and its institutional occasions. In P. Drew & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings* (pp. 101-134). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slavin, R. E., Madden, N. A., Karweit, N. L., Livermon, B. J., & Dolan, L. (1990). Success for all: First-year outcomes of a comprehensive plan for reforming urban education. *American Educational Research Journal*, *27*, 255-278.