

WCLTA 2013

## Learning Tacit Classroom Participation

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### Abstract

This article examines tacit participation in an adult art class. Drawing on video excerpts from an extensive 4 month video ethnographic study of an art school, I elucidate how a new student tacitly learns to participate in the group dynamics of the art school. Through video analysis, and using a mediated discourse theoretical (Scollon, 1998, 2011) and multimodal (inter)action analytical lens (Norris, 2004, 2011), I illustrate how the learning of tacit practices is accomplished. I show how successful participation for a novice depends on the following three tenets: 1. the ability to gain focused attention (by the novice); 2. the ability to grant the novice access to shared focused attention (by expert participants); and 3. the ability and willingness of expert participants to relinquish their own focused interaction at times in order to allow the novice to learn successful participation. When these three abilities are present, a new student integrates successfully into a new classroom setting, even if the student is mediocre at art. While, if these abilities are missing, a new student will drop out of the class (in this art school), even if they are very good at art.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

*Keywords:* Learning, multimodal (inter)action analysis, participation, practice;

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### 1. Introduction

This article examines a new student's learning of tacit participation in an adult art class. Drawing on video excerpts from an extensive 4 month ethnographic study of an art school, I elucidate through video stills how a new student tacitly learns to participate in the group dynamics of the art school. Tacit group participation in a learning environment, I argue, is the basis for successful learning of the actual content. I further argue that even content-strong students disengage and leave the art school if they have not learned how to participate in group interaction.

Through video analysis, and using a mediated discourse theoretical (Scollon, 1998, 2001) and multimodal

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(inter)action analytical approach (Norris, 2004, 2011), I illustrate how the learning of tacit practices is accomplished and how tacit practices are intertwined with shared focus between teacher and new student as well as with shared focus between students. Taking the mediated action (Scollon, 1998, 2001; Wertsch, 1998) as my unit of analysis, I, for example, show how the new student gains the teacher's attention; how other students allow this shared focus to happen (even at an inopportune moment); how the new student takes on an onlooker position, thereby gaining understanding of what is going on in the group, but also, and simultaneously, estranging herself from the group.

## 2. Site of engagement: Adult art lesson

In this article I consider an art class which consists of 5 adult female students. The class runs for 3 hours in the morning once a week. Four of the five students participate in the group lesson, engaging in various practices, while the new student has not yet acquired these practices and is performing the actions for the first time, never really performing them quite like the others. I take practice to mean the most typical way of the word, namely: habit, custom, tradition, way, or routine of doing something, using Scollon's (1998) definition of *practice as an action with a history*. The art teacher and the four female students, who regularly attend the classes, have developed their own practices of engaging with each other and with the art that they are producing. The new student, who has joined the group for the first time, of course, cannot know these practices; and the regular attendants, including the art teacher, are not consciously aware of the practices, as they are simply behaving in a manner or way that *feels* right. This doing what *feels* right is what I am calling tacit practices. These practices are unspoken and implicitly understood by those who enact them. Much of this doing what feels right is learned just as tacitly by new-comers as it is performed by those who habitually engage in these tacit practices. In fact, I would like to suggest that if such (normally) tacit practices are made explicit (such as a teacher telling a first grader to sit still, look at the board and to listen), these practices are more difficult to pick up and/or are often defied.

### 2.1. Tacit practices and attention levels

While this is an art lesson, I am here not interested in the art of painting or drawing that students engage in. I am here interested in the ways the students and art teacher interact with one another, while participating in this group-interaction. The students' positions are illustrated in Figure 1:

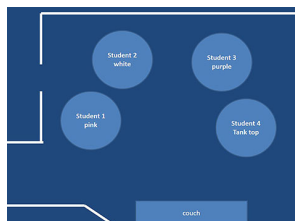


Figure 1: Students' positions in the art class



Figure 2: Andrea (left) and new student (right).

Here, the white lines indicate walls. There is one other student present, but she is working in a different room and only appears at the end of the lesson when she comments on the painting of student 2. The art teacher, Andrea (Figure 2 left), moves around and helps when help is requested. The woman I am mostly interested in here is the woman in Figure 2 on the right, as she is attending the art school for the first time. This woman lives in the same town as all of the other women and participation in the art school differs greatly from other areas of participation in the town. The usual participation in a women's group is based on spoken language. However, in the art school, talk is quite limited. Each one of the habitually attending art students has acquired the tacit practice of participating in this site of engagement and the new student is fairly quickly integrated. After only a few hours of painting she, on the one hand, is learning how to participate in this mutual (inter)action but, on the other hand, she is not participating quite like the others, yet.

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