



## Participation in the master's thesis seminar. Exploring the lack of discussion



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 August 2014

Received in revised form 29 November 2014

Accepted 16 December 2014

Available online 9 February 2015

#### Keywords:

Conversation analysis

Seminar interaction

Participation

Turn-taking

Feedback

### ABSTRACT

Studies conducted on seminar discussions reveal that the participants want active discussion, yet they often complain that this does not occur. Problems in seminar discussion have been explained by face concerns, frustration with various seminar practices, or as a strategic response to conflicting identities. This study provides an alternative viewpoint: two factors that can inhibit discussion are rigid institutional roles and turn-taking and sequence organization of the seminar. The two participants who have significant roles in the interaction are the thesis author and the discussant. The role of the other students in the seminar is unclear. They also orient to the fact that there is something problematic or unexpected in their participation. The study is based on a corpus of 25 h of videotaped master's thesis seminar discussions in a Finnish university. The data were transcribed and analyzed using ethnomethodological conversation analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

The seminar is a form of teaching that typically involves small groups of advanced students discussing their work. Since discussion and talk are among the seminar's governing features, it is no wonder that participants often hope for active discussion and for this interaction to take place among several, if not all the members of the seminar. This study analyzes participation in academic seminars by observing how the seminar members take part in the seminar's public discussion, how they take turns and what kind of opportunities they have for taking turns.

The following extract from the beginning of a seminar meeting at a Finnish university highlights the seminar participants' wish for the discussion to be carried out by several people. The seminar members are preparing to discuss one student's thesis. This is the first

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meeting in this seminar during which a student is to present some text from the actual thesis to the entire group. For this reason, there is discussion on how to proceed<sup>1</sup>:

**Extract 1:**

S = supervisor  
D = discussant  
A = thesis author

1 S: joo .hh tota, (.) nii sit, (.)  
yeah .hh well, (.) so then, (.)  
2 eiks me tehä sillee että,  
shall we do it so that,  
3 (1.5)

4 S: hhh että jos opponentti vaikka,  
hhh that if the discussant for instance,  
5 (.) ottaa esiin >erilaisia  
(.) brings forth >various  
6 aiheita< ja sit muut voi puuttua  
topics< and then others can intervene  
7 et sä voit kysyä aina muilta.  
so you can always ask the others.  
8 (.) [(ni et, ) ]  
(.) [(so that,,)]

9 D: [joo:. ] ((nodding))  
[yeah:. ]

10 S: ettei se oo pelkkää teidän, (.)  
so that it is not just your, (.)  
11 dialogia.  
dialogue.

12 D: [mä oon ihan samaa mieltä et  
[I totally agree that  
13 [(D starts gazing at A))  
14 että,  
that,  
15 A: [joo, ]  
[yeah, ]  
16 [(A nodding)]

17 (.)

18 D: et jos joku asia [mis- mistä  
that if some thing [th- that  
19 [(D gazing at S))

20 mä, (.) sanon [jotain ] ni jos  
I, (.) say [something] so if

21 S: [joo. ]  
[yeah. ]  
22 [(D gazing at others

23 D: muil on vastaavasti siihen  
others also have comments  
24 liittyvää kommenttia ('ni sit,')  
related to it ('so then,')

The supervisor (S) prompts the discussant (D) to raise topics for discussion (lines 1–6). The supervisor then states that the other seminar members can step in or the discussant can invite them to join in (lines 6–7). She marks the participation of other seminar members and the discussant's asking the other seminar members to participate as desired actions. The discussant agrees with the supervisor's instructions by nodding and producing the particle *joo*: ('yeah:,' line 9), which according to Sorjonen (2001) indicates accepting the previous turn or at least some aspect of it. The discussant further indicates agreeing to the supervisor's position by stating that the others having comments is to be acted upon in some way, while simultaneously gazing at other participants.<sup>2</sup> The discussant's role is rather clearly indicated here: he is the active participant responsible for providing feedback, for initiating topics for discussion, and, to a certain degree, for leading that discussion. The participants also state their hopes that the discussion will not be merely a dialogue between the discussant and the thesis author.

Seminar members have stated in interviews that lively discussion and active participation are valued or even expected in seminars, whereas being silent is seen as presenting problems (Kalaja, 1996; Luukka, 1996; Sandlund, 2004; Tracy, 1997). Moreover, from the point of view of theory of education there are many reasons to value active seminar discussion. Whether learning is thought to be a sociocultural activity (Mercer & Sams, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) or a process of knowledge building (Bereiter, 2002; Muukkonen, Lakkala, & Hakkarainen, 2005), it is envisioned as a process that requires dialogue and opportunities to ask questions and share knowledge. The quality of dialogue can even be seen as having a direct relation to the success or failure of education (Mercer, 2004). Another aspect of participation is practical: the seminar is a part of the students' curriculum and the only way to pass is to participate. In this

<sup>1</sup> The data are transcribed by adopting the conventions of conversation analytical transcription described in Jefferson (2004). The transcription symbols used can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> The discussant's turn is left incomplete, ending with the temporal adverb *ni sit*, ('so then,' line 9). Turns such as this can be left incomplete, when the future course of the turn is clear enough to be left unsaid, usually inferred from something that has been said before (cf. Koivisto, 2012: 1269–1270). In this case, the discussant can be seen to refer to the supervisor's turn suggesting that other seminar members can intervene (line 6).

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