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School knowledge in talk and writing: Taking 'when learners know' seriously

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ABSTRACT

This paper expands on the view that the documentation of the ways in which teachers and students produce definitions of such operational matters as 'reading', 'writing', 'learning' and 'knowledge' in classrooms is discoverable in the details of the speech exchange systems in those sites. The paper provides a brief introduction to applied ethnomethodological inquiry, especially as it has focused on classrooms, and applies it to transcripts of extracts from lessons. One conclusion concerns the fine coordination of interaction that classrooms display. A second conclusion concerns procedural definitions of the connection between literacy and knowledge that serve the purposes of initiating and maintaining lessons, compared to definitions that are operable in the production and assessment of students' learning through their written assignments. The suggestion is that constructs such as 'knowledge' are occasioned, purpose built-through on site through conventionalized systems of exchange that, reflexively, function to bring off the events that constitute the workings of such sites. The challenge for students in many classrooms seems to be to provide the 'missing what' that connects the daily heavy duties of classroom talk, which determines their success as classroom participants, to the occasional high-stakes writing performances that will come to characterize their success as learners.

> Applied ethnomethodology has uniquely sought to respecify ordinary action as a topic of inquiry in its own right. Its ordinariness lies in its mundane availability for the members of society. The idea that the members of society 'know what they are doing' is taken seriously in applied ethnomethodology. (Hester & Francis, 2007, p. 3)
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> What we require . . . is a model of classroom sociality which is adequate to, and accounts for task oriented interaction, and the conditions of sociality which stand as constraints and resources, in the setting, for task accomplishment. (Heap, 1990, p. 55)

1. Introduction

The research papers in this special issue pay detailed analytic attention to the features and demands of the written texts that students encounter and need to produce. They attend as well to features of lessons that can be introduced or emphasized in order to help students more directly acquire the resources they need to show mastery in these encounters and productions. This paper describes some aspects of classroom work that show how teachers and students conduct the 'business of the social world' of classrooms, how they interact to select, represent, structure, sequence, inter-connect and

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evaluate educational knowledge, and how written texts are used, referred to, and variously fore- or back-grounded in these activities.

The approach used in this paper is based on applied ethnomethodology, which is first briefly outlined, and then put to work on a series of extracts from classroom interactions. Attention in this paper is limited to outlining and illustrating a particular, applied ethnomethodological approach to describing routine features of classroom interactions that use written texts, that refer to them, or that project students' future engagements with them. One goal here is to draw out a substantive point about the significance of the connection between teaching knowledge, and learning writing in schools. Another is to make an analytic point about the consequences of taking seriously the idea that teachers and students 'know what they are doing' in the production of classroom lessons. The suggestion is developed here that a common misconception guiding much research and teaching that there is a direct, accessible, and already-known connection between the knowledge acquired and displayed in classroom interaction and the knowledge needed to display knowledge in the writing of texts for assessment. This misconception relies, for both researchers and teachers, on the direct, operational equivalent of the knowledge available for these two occasions of knowing – essence-of-knowledge.

2. Applied ethnomethodology and classroom talk

2.1. Sketching applied ethnomethodology

In most contemporary societies classroom activities are generally the sites in which youngsters need to learn about 'knowledge' – what it is, which forms of it are valued, why these forms are valued, and how they, as students, can engage and display those forms and thereby their understanding of these valuing processes. This gives classroom interaction a pivotal role in teaching, learning, curriculum, and school organization more broadly. This role has resulted in a forty-year tradition of research aimed at describing, theorizing, and improving teaching and learning in schools.

One of the key findings from this body of research is about the distinction between managerial and instructional work in classrooms: researchers have long maintained that some interaction is aimed apparently at managing students' behaviour within and outside the formally demarcated activities that constitute 'lessons'. It has been argued that these participation structures, among other things, create and sustain authority relations between the teachers and students (Brown & Armstrong, 1978; Wells & Wells, 1984). Edwards and Westgate (1987) reviewed the patterns of authority relations found in schools finding this category of talk to be so visible in the research they reviewed that they characterized the classroom bluntly: 'its outstanding characteristic . . . is one participant's claim to all the knowledge relevant to the business at hand' (p. 124).

Researchers have also shown the details of how teachers and students together orient to teachers' 'authority' (Freebody & Freiberg, 2000; Macbeth, 1991). They have documented how teachers and students coordinate particular ways of selecting and sequencing tasks at a particular tempo through, for example, their use of and compliance with speaker-selection strategies, calls to attention, reprimands, eye-contact and gesture, and the finely tuned uses of intonation and pausing (Francis & Hester, 2004; Hustler & Payne, 1982).

With regard to talk in classrooms apparently about presenting, monitoring, and reviewing curricular knowledge (Bernstein, 1990; Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Romaine, 1984; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), accounts are available from a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Christie (2005a, 2005b) has presented analyses drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics; Edwards and Westgate (1994), and Mercer and Littleton (2007) have summarized and contrasted anthropological, ethnographic and linguistic approaches.

This paper outlines another approach to describing classrooms, one based on applied ethnomethodology[1] (henceforth AEm), a branch of sociology that turns, rather than to conventional structuralist sociology, to how members of a society co-produce social order and a sense of orderliness through largely unremarked practices. It has been described as an 'analytic mentality' (Watson, 2009) in its heavy reliance on the detailed analysis of interaction, especially talk-in-interaction. Its foundational sociological insight was outlined by Garfinkel:

> the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings 'account-able.' The 'reflexive,' or 'incarnate' character of accounting practices and accounts makes up the crux of that recommendation. When I speak of accountable my interests are directed to such matters as . . . observable-and-reportable. (1967: 1)

Through their coordinated activities, members (of a society, or parties to an event) get the practical business of the activity done, and, via those same methods, render their practices visibly relevant and 'accountable' (to one another and to the observer and analyst), thereby both building and reflecting their sense of the practical purposes at hand. One of the key tenets of AEm is that participants to an activity co-produce events that are simultaneously practical, observable, and accountable through their use of local, situated methods in which 'the mastery of natural language is paramount' (Francis

[1] Descriptions of Applied ethnomethodology can be found as follows: The field originated in the work of Garfinkel (1967), Sacks (e.g. 1992/1964), and Schegloff (e.g. 1986, 2007). Two of its central lines of are Conversation Analysis (e.g. Antaki, 2008; Clayman & Gill, 2012; Drew & Heritage, 1992) and Membership Categorization Analysis (e.g. Hester & Francis, 2000; Jayyusi, 1984).