

Ecology and development in classroom communication

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Abstract

Drawing upon observer participation in a first grade classroom, we present a systemic functional analysis of classroom communication located in relation to social semiotics, cultural historical activity theory, and ecological psychology, relating context to meaning making. Two years of observation include field notes, student assessments, audio and video recordings, photographic surveys, interviews and discussions with the teacher, her colleagues, and the school principal. Qualitative methods inform the coordination of the theoretical frameworks, incorporating their key concepts for a more comprehensive understanding of teaching, learning, and development than any one alone can offer. Extending the examination of variations in register to include the physical elements of context, we present four episodes occurring with distinctive registers of communication, social organization, and configuration of artifacts in space and time. The analysis spans scales of language, social organization, space, and time to expand the notions of register and cohesion. We introduce the concepts of contextual cohesion and semiotic proximity in explanation of the patterns we find in meaning making.

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1. Semiotic complexity and the elementary classroom

A first grade classroom in the [Lilja Elementary School \(2005\)](#) forms the observational basis for this study. Like other elementary classrooms we have seen or participated in, this room's physical appearance becomes remarkably complex during the school year. To convey a sense of this complexity, we will provide a short and dense description, drawn from data taken in January. We use capitals to acknowledge not only the bounded concentrations in activity, space, and time called *synomorphs* ([Barker, 1949, 1968](#)), but also the artifacts that the children frequently access.

Entering the room, looking from left to right, one sees a lunch chart that doubles as a classroom sign-out. A shelved cart holds bins of books while also separating the Library from the rest of the classroom. Three large tables and one small table take up much of the floor space. Under the windows on the opposite wall, manipulative materials called Morning Graph, Money Chart, and Straw Chart sit prominently on top of open shelves containing other materials. In the far corner, and on the heater, are boxes that hold folders of the students' work. Above them is a bulletin board entitled "Class Expectations" that the children generated in September, guided by Jeanne, their teacher

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and the coauthor of this paper. Nearer, a large Red Rug lay in front of an easel, teacher chair, and a small bookshelf of read-aloud books. An adjacent small white board contains the day's reading- and writing-workshop schedule. Above the rug, on a large white-board, one sees the Day Schedule, Job Schedule, monthly calendar, a "Days of the Year" tally, Weather Chart, Temperature Chart, and a Word Wall. Above the white board are students' drawings, writings, and student-made alphabet charts. To the far right, and still closer, a small Yellow Rug lay in front of two more easels. At opposite ends of the room, two doors lead to the adjoining classrooms. There are many hundreds of books of all sizes in bins and on shelves throughout the room, many of which the teacher personally owns.

Walking into the room further, one sees a glimmer of a teacher desk, hidden at first by shelves holding bins of materials, draft boxes and the room's solitary student desk. Covering the teacher's desk are her weekly planner, piles of activity sheets and the books that she uses most often. An adjoining bookshelf holds those books she uses less often. On the wall next to her desk are the specialist schedule, the gymnasium schedule and a recess schedule. In the trade language of literacy teaching, the classroom design is *print-rich* and *learner-centered* (Avery, 2002; Fountas & Pinell, 1996), but to a newcomer, the room's appearance often appears busy or cluttered with the number and types of books, manipulatives, art, photos, and props.

It is striking how complicated this first grade classroom is in its spatial and semiotic formation and in the organization of what happens there over minutes, days, weeks, and the school year. First, while accountable for 23 children this particular year, of whom one quarter have special needs, Jeanne juggles lunch, recess, specialist, art room, library and computer lab schedules, ensuring that the children encounter reading, writing and math everyday, supplementing with science and social studies, while differentiating instruction with frequent assessments. Second, upon entering first grade, the children experience an *ecological transition* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), often engaging in unfamiliar patterns of participation in a fresh physical setting (Clay, 1991). Children make new social relations and begin to learn schools' specialized and highly scripted forms of social organization (Gutiérrez, 1993; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Mehan, 1979; Nelson, 1981). In first grade, children's development in attention, memory, and self-regulation encounters steepened challenges (DeMarie-Dreblow & Miller, 1988; Miller & Weiss, 1981; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2005a). Furthermore, responding to the "transition to school and the demands of literacy" (Wells, 1994, p. 69), first graders make dramatic gains in written language (NICHD, 2005b). Third, the classroom design changes from year to year. At the start of each school year, Jeanne anticipates her children's needs, based upon what she has learned about their Kindergarten experiences. For example, the yellow rug and second meeting area were not present in either the prior or the following year, and the table configurations have changed every year.

Observing Jeanne and her children communicating and learning with such a complex, dense and *changing* arrangement of semiotic artifacts makes one pause and wonder: How is meaning making in this classroom related to its social and material organization? What changes over time?

These questions inquire about the contextual, functional and changing nature of classroom communication. In response, this article coordinates 2 years of participant observation with key concepts in social semiotics, ecological psychology and cultural historical activity theory, relating context to meaning making. We propose to call the confluence of these theories *semiotic ecology*, an orientation we have adapted from Lang, which conceptualizes "people and things in places of inter-activity as evolving ecosystems" (Lang, 1997, p 192). The units of analysis intrinsic to each constituent theory of semiotic ecology, e.g. text, synomorph, activity structure and activity system, enable analysis that spans across scales of space, time, and social organization. The analysis works neither inductively from the data, nor deductively from theory, but dialectically, relating observations and theories in complementary fashion to study communicative meaning making, i.e. the communication of what Lemke (1990) terms *thematic content*.

This paper has the following organization. First, it identifies key theoretical concepts and the observation and analysis methods applied to locate patterns in relations between meaning making processes and their contexts. It describes the unit of the school and its last decade of development. Next, it "zooms-in" to a microgenetic discussion of teacher planning and classroom design that integrates her experience over the past year, projecting into the next, to explain the functional design of the classroom. Descriptions of three episodes follow that occur with distinctive forms of communication, social organization, and configuration of artifacts in space and time. The paper concludes with a theoretical discussion including the material and semiotic configuration of the classroom's design, its functionality in communication, its changes over time, and its relation to meaning making. It introduces the concepts of contextual cohesion and semiotic proximity in explanation of the patterns found.

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