ABSTRACT

The research literature has offered many ways of describing and analyzing classroom talk and interaction. Within qualitative studies there has been a focus on classroom talk and interaction as practical activity and local accomplishment. This article looks at the descriptive and analytical work of classroom members themselves in the course of talk and interaction, showing how this work is part of the production of classroom knowledge, classroom relations, and classroom order. The practice and possibilities of treating classroom members as observer-analysts of their own interactional scenes are outlined.

A feature of many recent qualitative studies of classroom interaction is a focus on the work and activities of participants in classroom settings in producing those settings, particularly but not exclusively through the organization of classroom talk. Viewing classroom talk and interaction as practical activity and local accomplishment has been influenced by the analytic interests of ethnomethodology (e.g., Heap, 1985) and interactive sociolinguistics (e.g., Green and Harker, 1988). A related aspect of these approaches has been to treat the organization of talk-in-interaction as a topic in its own right and not merely as an unexplicated resource for classroom members or for researchers.

There are a number of dimensions to study classroom interaction with an interest in the organization of talk-in-interaction. Studies which attend to the detail of classroom activity and local accomplishment have been influenced by the analytic interests of ethnomethodology (e.g., Heap, 1985) and interactive sociolinguistics (e.g., Green and Harker, 1988). A related aspect of these approaches has been to treat the organization of talk-in-interaction as a topic in its own right and not merely as an unexplicated resource for classroom members or for researchers.

In addressing the question of what is being done, participants in classroom settings can encompass a considerable variety of interests and topics. The focus in this article is on the descriptive and analytical work that students and teachers do in the course of classroom talk and interaction. I use a number of transcript segments produced from audiotapes of classroom activities recorded in recent years in a number of Australian classrooms to identify and illustrate this work of classroom members, and to fill out the sketch given above of how such study can inform our understanding of classroom practice. In the discussion I attend to the local, situated organization of classroom knowledge, of classroom relations, and of classroom order. I conclude by pointing to relationships between the descriptive and analytic work of classroom members and the descriptive and analytic work of classroom researchers.

THE LOCAL ORGANIZATION OF CLASSROOM INTERACTION

Studies of the organization of social interaction include a focus on how classroom members produce and display the features and patterns of interactions that are observable available to researchers as well as to classroom members themselves. This approach involves looking at the production of the categories and activities that for other research approaches are already present and visible and taken as given, and instead studying how these features of classroom life are themselves produced or made to happen.

For example, Payne (1976) addressed the question of how classroom members achieve the social-organizational features of a 'lesson' in progress that make it recognizable as a lesson to participants and researchers alike. Elsewhere Payne and Hustler (1980) have analyzed the interactive work involved in assembling a school class as a cohort, again a feature of classroom life that is taken as a given in other research. McHoul (1978) took as his topic and problem the 'sense of formality' that people can recognize in instructional talk in classrooms. He explored the work that classroom members do with turn-taking, gaps and pauses and other aspects of talk-organization that provide for and ground that sense of formality.

In studies of classroom order, Davies (1983) has analyzed an instance of organizational talk in an elementary school classroom on the first day of school to show how students use their questions to acknowledge that they are hearing the teacher's description of the kind of teacher he wants to be, and to hand him opportunities to elaborate his version. Paallev (1990a, 1990b) has analyzed the organization of teacher-student talk in a number of classrooms at elementary, secondary and tertiary levels. She has observed how teachers and students achieve a workable classroom order through their conversation and interaction despite cross-purposes and contradictions in their classroom descriptions. Davies and Munro (1987) examined the phenomenon of apparent "disorder" in a videotaped classroom scene and produced an account that recasts the scene as predictable and orderly by pointing out the conflicting definitions and practices of the teacher and a disruptive student. Macbeth (1990) has studied the achievement of a classroom "reproach" as part of the practical work of classroom management.
Each of these studies shows that classroom members not only assemble the scenes in which they are involved, they also produce and recognize the features and problems of the settings and activities in which they are engaged. Such studies of the organization of classroom interaction are studies of local scenes, and in some cases single instances. When examined for features of their internal social organization, specific, actual instances of interaction can be treated as one of a set of other possible instances of that class or category of interaction. In turn they can be as informative theoretically or practically as analysis based on repeated or accumulated observations. And as Macbeth (1990, p. 191) has put it, "local scenes are the stuff of social order."

The idea that interaction is itself locally organized and that the fine grain of this organization of interaction achieves the recognizability of a classroom lesson, can be illustrated with an extract from a tenth-grade English lesson.1

Text 1: "Fables and Morals"

1 T On the board, you'll see four words. Look at them please? (3.0) Some of them you will be familiar with. (4.0) You've probably heard the word, fable. (Does) would anyone like to suggest what a fable is?

2 S Is it like a (collection)?

3 T No.

4 S Story?

5 S ( ) short story (with a meaning)?

6 T Yes=

7 S =It's a little, sort of story that's got a moral to it?

8 T Ok, so it's a story with a moral and the reason the word moral is next on the list is because there's a connection and what is a moral?

9 S Um, the (meaning), of the story

10 T Alright anyone like to=

11 S =what it teaches you

12 T Right okay so there's li- little lesson (in there). Now in a fable, where's the moral usually come?

(3.0)

13 Ss At the end, end

14 T Alright so it's actually stated, at the end just in case you kind of missed the idea. Now can you suggest any connection between the word fable and the word parable?

15 S a parable has ( )

16 S Parable's normally a religious thing?

17 T ( ) suggestions I mean some very famous parables?

18 S from the Bible

19 S (sower)

20 T Right! Things like the sower and the seed the, Good Samaritan those sorts of things. Now, what about the moral in a parable?

It is specific features of how the talk is organized - for example the familiar continuing cycle of questions, answers, and comments on answers - that make this text read like a classroom lesson. It would be unlikely to be mistaken for some other kind of talk in some other kind of setting, even if the designators T (teacher) and S (student) were not included in the text. Teacher and students design their turns at talk in ways that produce and maintain this cycle. In so doing they also achieve the institutional categories "student" and "teacher," they give the lesson its formality, and they produce other commonly recognized features of classroom interaction.

One design feature that illustrates this is the students' use of interrogative intonations in some of their answers. This interrogative intonation matches precisely the teacher's call for "suggestions" and it is a self-description of the provisional status of student knowledge. Moreover, interrogative intonation hands the teacher a conversational space for replying to the answer while also characterizing that teacher space as one where a pronouncement can be made on the adequacy of the answer. It gives the teacher also the position from which to redistribute the chance to answer to some other member of the student cohort. In this way the institutional category "teacher" is continuously achieved. Thus the orderliness and hence recognizability of this interactional sequence as part of a classroom lesson is a local, situated accomplishment. The institutional relation, teacher-student, is similarly an ongoing accomplishment of this same talk. It is re-achieved in each and every activity cycle. "Who" the participants are, doing what, in what kind of setting, might look obvious but can be shown to be finely socially organized. What they and we hear or see as the classroom, the lesson, the teacher, the students, the relations among speakers, are created in and through the organization of their talk. This draws attention to the context-making work of classroom participants.

CLASSROOM TALK AND THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Through activity structures such as question-answer-comment cycles, what counts as knowledge in the classroom is organized. The point of such cycles appears to be in part to produce propositional knowledge (Heap, 1985) in the
form of "a fable is a story with a moral" in Text 1. Their point is to secure the joint production of such knowledge. This production is visible in the text, where the teacher initiates the proposition and the students complete it ("a fable is a [what? it is a] story with a moral"). The production is public and all students can be held accountable for hearing and remembering such knowledge even if they were at that point members of the overhearing audience rather than participating speakers.

The point of teaching in this way is, however, more and other than securing these propositional knowledges (Heap, 1983, 1985). The practices of production of such propositional knowledges - for example interactional work with the possible reasonings, inferences, connections that might be proposed along the way - amount to showing "cultural logic" in use. Thus Heap (1985) has characterized such sequences as providing students with "comprehension of culture and the logic of its organization and possibilities (p. 265)."

This includes appreciation of how school knowledge is assembled and how it is to be spoken. In speaking or as overhearing audience, students are listener-analysts of the ongoing scene of knowledge production. Part of their work is to extract or abstract from sometimes quite complicated sequences what it is they might or should be noting or remembering, i.e. what "counts" as the knowledge in the lesson:

Text 2: Grade 1 Reading Lesson

1 T It could well be just like last week's story couldn't it? What was our story last week?
2 S One Cold Wet
3 T Oh, someone put (up) their hand up. They
4 S Uhh!
5 T They might've even had the right answer. Helen.
6 H One Cold Wet Night.
7 T One Cold Wet Night. (From) the look of the outside I think it might be a cold wet day. (2.5) And perhaps a cold wet night. Alright well our story this week is , Yes Ma'am. Yes Ma'am. ...

In Text 2 above, the teacher's call in the opening line for a description of what was "last week's story" is a familiar practice that documents this accountability and, as it turns out, is in this case a search for the title of the story. It can be noted also that the teacher introduces what could be heard either as a side commentary on today's weather or as an accountable part of the lesson knowledge. "Comprehension of culture" work in lessons might be seen as providing a challenging terrain for analysis by students and it is on this kind of terrain that cultural advantage is realized.

In Text 3 below, a similar challenge to remember some specific knowledge from a previous lesson and to fill in the teacher's who was "at the top" is observable:

Text 3: Seventh-Grade Humanities Lesson

1 T ...Remember we did two diagrams to show the difference between the middle ages and the contemporary times. Which diagram did we draw for the middle ages. Robyn?
2 R A triangle?
3 T Good, a triangle. Who was up the top, Rob?
4 R Pardon?
5 T Who was at the top?
6 R The man?
7 T Pardon?
8 R The man?
9 T The man was. He was. What was the man's name?
10 R The king
11 T Right. The king. Good girl. Right. So the king's up here. Who was down the bottom. Poor old fellow.

In this case, it took considerable work to make Robyn find "the king" as the solution to the puzzle of who. In both cases, Texts 2 and 3, the questions could in principle allow alternative answers. With regard to Text 3, it could be that Robyn initially drew on a categorization device (men-women) different from the teacher's (king-serfs); both had been part of the previous lesson. Knowledge-production practices in classrooms involve analyses of what configuration of fact is required on specific occasions, following sometimes difficult clues. "What was the man's name?" might be heard as an indirect approximation to what was the man's political position, but it appears that Robyn was able to use it successfully to solve the category-problem.

Elsewhere Hammersley (1977) has identified some of the cultural resources that students bring into play to answer teachers' questions, including solving problems of relevance (as in the category problem above) and extensiveness (how much does the teacher want to hear at this point in the lesson?). McHoul and French (1984) have studied the categorization work involved in producing and relating "commonsense" and "formal" school knowledge. Heyman (1986) has studied teachers' and students' uses and hearings of "formulations" of what it is they have been saying or doing in the lesson talk. Lemke's (1990) analysis of "talking science" also shows the interpretive and analytical challenges that are characteristic of instructional talk. Students need to "find the science in the dialogue" (Lemke, 1990, p.11). Working out what formal knowledge is to be produced is not always straightforward. Such studies show the kinds of practical reasoning that might be used in the course of organizing instructional talk. They also inform an understanding of how relativities and differences of cultural knowledge translate into academic advantage or disadvantage.

The organization of classroom talk appears also to describe and achieve a specific kind of relation that can or should obtain among teacher, students and formal school knowledge. In all these lesson extracts the teacher takes and is given the prerogative to question and to pronounce on the
adequacy of answers, to decide and so to control topic and participation. The significance of these discourse features (see for example McHoul 1978; Mehan 1979; Edwards 1980, 1981; Baker and Freebody 1989) include the idea that the teacher claims and is assigned a privileged relation to formal school knowledge while students are positioned and position themselves as candidates for that knowledge. In Text 1 the teacher announces the classification that will be used to organize the knowledge and its production (e.g. fable, moral, parable). In Text 2 the teacher's categorization of "last week's story" and "this week's story" is absolutely site and activity specific and effectively brackets out of contention any other stories that teacher or students might have heard or read last week or this week. The "week" is the school week and the "story" is the story that was read together with the teacher ("our story"). McHoul's (1991) description of reading-in-a-classroom captures and elaborates a view of how students are positioned collectively as subjects of reading pedagogy. Part of their analytical work is to hear how they are being positioned in the teacher's talk.

Thus the organization of lesson knowledge is intimately tied to the organization and centrality of a teacher-student relationship. Teacher directives and comments work as descriptions of how school knowledge passes through the grid of that relationship and needs to pass there in order to "count." The following extract from another first grade reading session shows this description being done another way. The students' overlapping proposals about the difference between alligators and crocodiles are retrospectively described by the teacher's two deferrals of their ideas (lines 9 and 13) to what the text will reveal (see also Baker and Freebody, 1989):

Text 4: "Alligators"

1 T Who is the stranger? Andrew?
2 A Crocodile
3 T Think about the name of the story, it is an
4 S alligator
5 T&Ss all.i.ga.tor
6 T Yes alligators and crocodiles look a lot alike, don't they Daniel?
7 S [Yeah my, my sister's got an alligator
8 T [Only one have got small beaks and some have got long beaks
9 S [But there's a diff-
10 T [Well we have to have a look and see what the difference is later
11 T There's a difference in 'em
12 S Ummmmmmm. Do you know the difference?
13 T We'll have to find out, won't we? ((reading))

THE ALLIGATOR DIDN'T ANSWER...

Text 5: Grade One Reading Lesson

1 T Yes about a dog called Arthur. 'N if you look closely, he's a bit of a strange dog. He's doing some funny things there.
2 Ss ((laugh))
3 T Let's find out what happens about Arthur
4 S [different
5 Ss ((whispering 4 seconds))
6 S I think we've had this before
7 T Have you [well you haven't had it our class=
8 S [yes
9 S =in this class
10 T [maybe you had it in library or something like that
11 S [in this class
12 S [in kindy
13 T Oh well, let's see, [I'm sure it's a story]
14 S [have we?
15 S long time ago
16 T that you've enjoyed if you have had it. ((reads))

ARTHUR WAS A VERY ORDINARY DOG...

Students raise the possibility of having "had" the story before and some discussion occurs about where and when this might have been. This is a delicate interjection into the teacher's already-underway reading of the story, especially as the teacher had already (gently) disqualified one student from answering a question about the story because he had already read it. The timing of the interjection and the collective participation in it conveys some of this delicacy, as if the students needed to work out how to break the bad news. Students' proposals about where and when they could have
had the story before appear to be addressed to each other as well as the teacher. Their use of "we" in lines 6 and 14 could be heard as within-cohort talk. This is a subtle and momentary recasting of the scene by separating the students from the teacher, in comparison to the teacher's otherwise continuous she-and-they inclusive talk ("our, we"). These are "scenic practices" that are descriptive of the scenes of which they are a part.

The teacher's resolution of the where and when issue deflects the problem by establishing that the story was not read in this class (lines 6-8) with this teacher (line 10) although at least one student sustains that it was (line 11). Therefore the story can be treated as a first-time reading, which is precisely the way in which the teacher has begun the reading and how she continues it. It is this reading - including the positioning that students are to adopt in relation to the story and this teacher's reading of it - that "counts". The students proceed to enjoy the reading of the story. Their identification and then dropping of a 'problem' in the scene could be seen as the result of an analysis very similar to that which I have proposed.

Texts 2, 4 and 5, taken from recordings in the early years of schooling, might be read as socialization or acculturation scenes in that much work goes in the (self-) positioning of students and into settling the conditions of their classroom participation (cf. Mehans's 1979 study of competent membership of the classroom community as turn-taking expertise). Mackay's (1974) analysis of child-adult interaction similarly examined the unnoticed and uncredited work that goes into being "socialized". More specifically, these texts give illustration of the work that students do in the course of being assembled as students and of being taught: to explicate how they participate in their self-production as a category of character in the ongoing narrative of the classroom and how they participate in the social organization of the category "teacher".

When we compare the descriptive and analytical work available in transcripts of lessons in the early years of school with those in later years, the work of scene-description looks very similar. Looking back and forth across transcripts of different grade-level classes, it is difficult to find more sophistication here or there. A final transcript example, taken again from a seventh-grade lesson on sex roles in the middle ages and in the present shows again the 'scenic practice' of students in describing (at least to each other) how they are hearing what is going on in the here-and-now of the lesson space:

Text 6: A Lesson on Sex Roles

1 T Peter? ((nominating another contributor to 'differences between men and women'))

2 P Um. Women were less er less equality
   ((loud protests and laughter))

3 T Right. So the difference were that women

4 P That women weren't as equal as men
   ((mutter from class)) they weren't as

5 T We'll take all of these and put them on the board. Then we'll look at them and see whether you agree whether they hold water or not. So don't kick poor old Peter to death before you've finished.

The protests, laughter and mutters from the class crosscuts the questioning exchange going on between teacher and Peter. It is a commentary on the contents of that exchange, but also a commentary on the knowledge-production practices being used, on the identities of the speakers and on the membership of the class itself. This analysis is picked up exactly in the teacher's production of a counter scene-description (line 5) that both deflects the responsibility to Peter while trying to protect him from it, and to reassemble the unity of the class by foreshadowing a next formal step in the lesson (see Baker & Davies 1989 for an extended analysis of this lesson).

CLASSROOM TALK AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The link between "local scenes" and "social order" is implicit in much classroom research which draws connections between social interaction and social structure. In the case of classroom interaction research the connections pass through a grid of institutional relations, in that the ways that people talk and interact in classrooms are, in some specifics, recognizably different from how they talk and interact elsewhere. However, this recognition does not remove classroom talk and interaction from the domain of the relation of 'talk and social structure'. Instead, this move situates classroom interaction, and in this case specifically classroom talk-in-interaction, firmly as part of the everyday production of social structure, and not as a neutral or protected zone. Zimmermann and Boden (1991, p. 6) have usefully linked institutional talk and social structure in the following way:

Consideration of the contribution of talk-in-interaction to the constitution of institutional settings (and the production of social structure) will show how this fundamental organization operates as an "enabling" mechanism for institutional modes of conduct. Extending the study of talk-in-interaction to those occasions of talk demonstrably oriented to institutional or organizational aspects of settings is a first approximation to understanding how forms of talk-in-interaction are selected, adapted and combined - in a word, configured - to reflexively produce and reproduce social structure.

The same member-competencies and resources enable the social organizing of 'classroom' interaction as enable the social organizing of interaction elsewhere. This social organizing of interaction in and for the classroom is a case of the reflexive production and reproduction of social structure. In the preceding discussion I have commented on the organization of age, knowledge and authority relations in classroom talk. Text 6 is drawn from lesson talk that also "reflexively produces and reproduces" the gender order. Such relations are the bases of social order in the classroom and they are assembled in and for schooling. They underwrite the project of schooling. But the reach of these relations extends beyond the classroom walls. Classrooms are not times-out from the production of culture and social structure.

DESCRIBING CLASSROOM INTERACTION

In explicating the descriptive and analytical work of teachers and students in the course of teaching and being taught, a further move can be made. This move has been implied in the vocabularies used to describe what is being accomplished in the case of each of the local scenes represented in transcript examples presented. By looking inside the organization of the talk, it is possible to find and
describe classroom members' resources for producing classroom knowledge, classroom relations and classroom order. The descriptive and analytical work of teachers and students cannot be captured through counting events or searching for decontextualized patterns. Treating teachers and students as observer-analysts of their ongoing classroom scenes implies assigning to them a methodology for studying the classroom interaction in which they are engaged. This raises questions and possibilities for classroom interaction research in another way as well.

In studies of classroom interaction it is often the researcher who is taken to "describe and analyze" while teacher and students "interact" or are asked to produced accounts about their interaction, as if description and analysis are not part of the interaction itself. This relates to a broader question of how the character and work of 'observers' and 'observed' are conveyed in classroom research. Woolgar (1988, p. 28) has addressed the problem of how the "character of the other" is textually produced in the case of writing and reading ethnographies. To the extent that studies of classroom interaction can be read as ethnographic texts (and transcripts as data: see Ochs, 1979) how the activity of classroom members is characterized and conveyed - how we read and write our classrooms and their characters - is part of the work of cultural representation.

Characterizing the work of classroom interaction as the work of description and analysis by classroom members of their ongoing interactional scenes is one way of observing their practical activity and local accomplishment. I have proposed that this is a useful way of proceeding because of the purchase it gives on issues of knowledge-production and social relations in classrooms through the study of local instructional scenes. Referring closely and explicitly to how classroom members characterize who they are and what they are doing in the course of assembling their classroom interaction is a way of connecting researchers' descriptions to those of classroom members. The same or similar transcript examples could be used to open out alternative accounts, different ways of making sense of the activity and proposing its significance. As Paoletti (1990a, p. 117) has shown, descriptions create classrooms, and this applies to the work of researchers producing social science as much as to the work of classroom members producing the sense and structure of their classroom relations.

REFERENCES


