Principal talk: The activity of a principal in school meeting talk

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Much of the business of schools, as well as of other organisations, is done in meetings of various kinds. School principals spend large parts of their working time in meetings, both formal and informal, and their leadership within schools is often exercised through these meetings. This paper reports how the principal of a school in one study actually does the business of a school and university partnership through the activity of meeting talk. The meeting talk of the participants in the partnership work constitutes the data of the study, and the data is represented through transcribed audio recordings. Using the conventions and techniques of conversation analysis and membership category analysis, the study undertakes a close analysis of how the principal and the other participants actually co-construct the partnership activity through their talk-in-interaction. In particular, it explores how the principal uses the resources of institutionalised meeting talk to accomplish such leadership activities as turn allocation, topic choice, topic change, and member participation.

There is a traditional view in the education profession of a divide between practice and theory, a divide that is reflected in a practitioner/academic divide. This divide is described as a geographic feature that it is variously proposed might be “bridged” (Down & Hogan, 1999), “prevented” (Dickinson, Eade, Binns, Craig & Wilson, 2004), “crossed” (Sherman & Torbet, 2000), or otherwise “attended to” (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This paper derives from a study premised on a reluctance to engage with this metaphor of a “divide”, preferring to understand a space beyond the divide where teachers and academics become different kinds of practitioners, sharing common goals and activities in their search for knowledge about teaching and learning. In particular, it considers the leadership activities of the principal of one school involved in such “hybrid” practice and theory work (Brennan, 1998).

A belief in the value of sharing the work of teacher learning and school improvement between schools and universities has led to the development of a range of partnership models. Often the partnership is one between a university and an individual school and, in these cases, the school is often described as a ‘partner school’, a ‘professional development school’, or a ‘professional practice school’. The basis for shared understandings and successful collaborative work between schools and universities lies in the acknowledgement of a shared interest. In proposing that partnerships between schools and universities provide a means of reifying assumptions such as these, Goodlad argues in favour of these partnerships thus:

For schools to get better, they must have better teachers, among other things. To prepare better teachers … universities must have access to schools using the best practices. To have the best practices, schools need access to new ideas and knowledge. This means that
universities have a stake in school improvement just as schools have a stake in the education of teachers. (Goodlad, 1985, p.6)

The principal of the school considered here was the inaugural principal of the new school. In opening the school, he had from the outset developed a conscious and planned strategy of developing close ties with the education faculty of a university in the same city. He drew on his close knowledge of the developmental needs of the school, its staff and its community and his existing links with academics from the university faculty in developing this relationship.

Meeting talk
All meetings, formal and informal, are "interactionally bounded" – they take place within the boundaries identifiable as a beginning, a middle and an end (Boden, 1994). In the meeting talk reported in this study, numbers of phases, including but by no means confined to a beginning and an end, can be identified. Within these phases, participants co-construct the work of accomplishing relationship-building while controlling and overseeing the work of the meeting. This relationship-building is the real work of these meetings, though it occurs within the project of developing teachers' professional knowledge and expertise.

The social structure of a group is formulated by both the topic content of meetings and the interaction of the participants. This work is not hidden from meeting participants. They recognise that “the system is both of their own making and self-operating” (Baker, 1997, p. 97). The phases of the meetings are identified by the flow of topic content, and by the entry and exit of participants from the talk. Thus the structure of the meetings, the co-construction of membership categories, and the relationships among the participants develop as “topics are inserted, dropped and resurrected using the locally organised conventions for entry into the talk” (Baker, 1997, p. 96).

The interaction between teachers and academics throughout this study invariably occurs as talk in meetings. This talk would be expected to differ from the conversations one might observe in contexts such as informal social situations. However it cannot be concluded that the "institutional" context of interactions of this type simply shapes the nature of the talk. This is an example of the reflexivity of talk-in-interaction. The talk both shapes the context and is shaped by it: talk is both the project and the product of its context (Heritage, 1997). This acknowledgment of the discrete nature of institutional talk invites us to consider and attempt to identify the characteristics of such talk – what it is that sets this talk apart from other, more informal, forms of interaction.

Institutional talk can be differentiated from other kinds of talk. Drew and Heritage (1992) have identified three main features of institutional talk. These features can be utilised to explicate the ways in which participants orient to one another as they construct the institutional features of their context. These three main types of features are: an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity conventionally associated with the institution in question; special and particular constraints on what participants will treat as allowable contributions to the business at
hand; and inferential frameworks and procedures that are particular to specific institutional contexts (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 22).

In the meetings whose talk-in-interaction is the subject of this paper, these tasks and orientations, identities, constraints and procedures all influence the talk of the participants as it both shapes the institutional environment and is shaped by it.

A basic question confronting a researcher given this rich source of meeting talk is where to begin to identify these institutional features of the talk. Heritage (1997) suggests that there are six basic aspects of the talk where one might find these features:

- the organisation of the turn-taking;
- the overall structural organisation of the interaction;
- the organisation of sequence;
- the design of turns;
- the lexical choices that are made; and
- the epistemological and other forms of asymmetry that occur. (Heritage, 1997)

Analysis of the meeting talk searches for these features, providing a useful summary of the process involved in analysing this particular set of data. While these could be a useful guide for sequential analysis, they are not used here as sequential steps. Rather, the analysis engages in a search for meaning in the overall structure of the interaction, and acknowledges the contribution of the other features in the construction of the talk-in-interaction.

In the analysis of the meeting talk, the aim is to identify the categories that the participants construct for themselves and for one another. One way that they do this is that they name the categories (Vallis, 2001). The transcripts show that the participants name the category ‘partnerships’ in their meeting talk. This is the category to which they are hearably oriented as it is the agenda for the meetings. As part of this naming, there is reference to the types of activities (also known as predicates) that implicate the named category, so that reference is made to needing “some advice”, and working “together” and so on.

**The exercise of leadership in the meeting talk**

The school principal and other leaders constantly construct the category-bound activities of leadership throughout the meetings in this study. These activities have been alluded to earlier, and will now be illustrated through reference to some of the talk that occurs during a long meeting attended by several participants in leadership positions in both the school and the university faculty in the partnership. In this meeting, the faculty dean, the manager of the university campus library, and a senior academic faculty member have joined the regular participants, to explore ways in which the partnership work might be progressed for the mutual benefit of the school staff and the faculty. Throughout the meeting there are instances where the principal undertakes the activities bound to the category of leader, and the other participants co-construct this work through their talk.
Principal as partnership leader

Leading into this brief extract of talk, the faculty dean and a teacher (Mandy) have been discussing ways in which school teachers might be able to qualify for academic credit in recognition of certain kinds of partnership work. The principal is now heard to recognize an opportunity to promote the partnership with the teachers, and to further develop links within the partnership.

158  **P**  If there was a small group of a few people who wanted to start working in a project like that for credit towards a say a Masters' degree, that'd be a really they could then provide the leadership for the whole activity in the school, (0.5) work with Chris and his people (1.0) on the program of (0.5) um activity that would lead towards that [in both ways]

159  **Jen**  [Mm]

160  **Mandy**  I don't say that frivolously, because (1.0) my aim to (1.0) how I'm working at the moment (0.5) the theory and the practice (0.5) must (. ) continuously be merging (1.0) otherwise (1.0) I'll just (inaud). But, ah, looking at the outcomes the problem solving areas, I want to work on that, but I must see that the outcomes are being met, I must know that I am tracking the kids as well. My whole lot must be with them. So (0.5) I'd be interested in working with something (0.5) more practical like that, that might at the end get me some (1.0) academic credit.

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The principal confirms his expertise in developing links between academic and school work. He proposes (turn 158) that a group of teachers using this project to provide a ‘laboratory’ for their Masters degree studies could also provide leadership to the school staff in the implementation at the school level. In this, he is assuming his customary role both as partnership expert and as “gatekeeper” of the partnership project.

Jen, an academic, keeps in touch with this topic by uttering affirming “Mm” interventions throughout this passage of talk (one of which appears in this brief extract). These utterances generally provide support for the speakers, and through them she is also laying claim to sharing the expertise of the main participants. The first of these utterances, which has the effect of interrupting the principal (turn 159), provides a space for Mandy to develop the idea she had commenced in her previous turn.

Mandy makes explicit (turn 160) the importance for her of theory being closely linked to and supportive of her practice as a classroom teacher. She reiterates that she might be interested in pursuing academic credit through working with an activity that allows her to “see that the outcomes are being met”; to be “tracking the kids as well”; since for her, “My whole lot must be with them”. She stresses that this “might” get her some academic credit. By listing the aspects of her work as a teacher that have priority for her, she

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1 In the transcript extracts and analysis provided here, all names are pseudonyms. The principal’s turns are designated by ‘P’.

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accomplishes her expertise as a classroom practitioner, while allowing the possibility that she might in a subsidiary outcome of this work achieve some academic expertise as well. Both Mandy and the principal construct the category of expert teacher and expert partner. However while they do this together, their co-construction is not at all in harmony.

By proposing for the “expert group” of teachers the activity of providing leadership to the other teachers in the school, the principal constructs to category of “expert teacher plus leader”. Mandy, on the other hand, proposes for herself a different category. Mandy constructs the category of “expert teacher as effective classroom teacher”. In accounting for being an effective teacher, she names the category-bound activity of achieving the desired educational outcomes for her students. She completes this utterance by proposing “So (indicating logical consequence) I’d be interested in working with something more practical like that” (turn 160). Mandy and the principal demonstrate what Lepper termed disjunctive categorizations (Lepper, 2000). The disjunctive categories here are principal/teacher, where the attempts by these two category members at the categorization of “expert teacher” are so clearly dissonant. This type of pairing implicates particular understandings of the work of principal and teacher. The principal’s preference is for an account that emphasises leadership, which by implication suggests that it is the school and the partnership that benefit. One might further suggest that the principal also benefits from such an arrangement. Mandy, on the other hand, has a preference for advancing her own knowledge and accomplishments as a teacher, so that a partnership becomes an avenue through which to formalise her self-nominated status of expert teacher within an academic program.

These differing constructions of “expert teacher” by the principal and Mandy have consequences for how partnership is enacted. As shown here, their expectations with regard to what counts as appropriate activities for “expert teachers” differ. This highlights the difficulties associated with partnership work. In particular, we see how, in this instance at least, the principal values the activity of leadership, in others as well as in himself.

The principal as owner and gatekeeper
Later in the meeting, a phase of talk is identified where a senior education faculty academic, Chris, conducts what is almost a monologue about the work he is doing with some other schools and how similar activity might be useful in the context of the present partnership. His turns at talk are of quite significant length, punctuated only by brief interventions on the part of some of the other participants. The most frequent contributor to these interventions is the principal. As we hear so often throughout the talk of these meetings, the principal continually constructs his identity as the project host/owner, as the gatekeeper of the partnership work, by providing small corrections of fact, giving permission for “other experts” to continue their major contributions, and by representing his version of what is in the teachers’ and the school’s interests. For example, in turn 211 Mary (the dean) attempts to steer Chris’s talk to some specific local examples where she believes she has some personal knowledge:

210 Chris I'm very interest (0.5) I'm very happy (0.5) to organise with a group of people who might be
interested in Maths, to do a program just to (.) look at the Maths program of the school and the change and all that type of thing (0.5) and to involve anybody who wants to do an M.Ed. As single M.Ed. units, or (.) an M.Ed. research or whatever they want to do. And to turn it into a research project from our perspective (2.0) um (2.0) in the past we used to apply for SPIRT funds and we found them very hard to get with a single school. You usually need to be associated with a group. But we do have (.) at our university a relationship now with ind.. (0.5) money from a school go..(0.5) from a (0.5) industry goes into research and the university will (0.5) give 50 cents for every dollar into that research project as well. There may be ways of utilising that on a small scale (.) to throw a little more money=

211 Mary =And I think Kevin Aspinall too in Murray, is interested in partnerships, too, at district level, so it might be possible=
212 P =We're not in that district, um
213 Mary Oh you’re not?
214 P We're actually in (1.0) the next school up to the north of us is in that district. We're in, ah, Jesmond district.
215 Mary Alright. Ah, that=
216 P =Terry Montrose is the district director there. I haven't heard him talking about (1.0) those sorts of issues=
217 Chris =Yes, but (0.5) the district base isn't what holds=
218 P =No, but certainly the Trevor Kennedy and so on are=
219 Chris =Yeah. And very and and if we can get a ah Ed Queensland connection then you can (1.0) Jen was saying that (.) a lot of this work involves teacher change and professional development and that's an [interest

220 P [Yeah
221 Chris other researchers might like to come into it=
222 P =Yeah

The principal quickly intervenes to correct Mary’s information (turn 212) and, in his brief exchange of turns with Mary (212 – 216), he closes off her new direction. He informs Mary about where the school sits in relation to the geography of personnel of the district. In this way, he takes control of the talk, and Mary does not continue. In turn 217, Chris re-enters the meeting talk by taking up again the thread of his contribution, and in turn 218 the principal interrupts Chris by continuing his exchange with Mary. This does, however, have the effect of closing Mary out altogether, and providing Chris with permission to continue. Two more quick interventions of “Yeah” from the principal (turns 220 and 222) reinforce Chris’s permission to take the floor of the meeting.

In this brief but decisive interchange involving the three most powerful participants in the meeting (the dean, a professor, and the school principal), these participants co-construct the hegemony of the partner leaders in determining the topics of the meeting talk, the allocation of turns, and the situational supremacy of the leader hosting the meeting. This
is important partnership work, highlighting as it does how individuals in leadership positions personify the partner institutions and position them according to the location of the talk and the relatively situated nature of the activity achieved. In particular, it is very noticeable throughout this phase (and others) that the principal, in whose school most of the meetings are conducted, is the participant most involved by far in the meeting talk. In fact, most of the talk occurs as conversations between the principal and others, the specific “others” being selected by him or self-selecting according to the particular topic and the relative status of the other participants.

**The principal as topic selector**

Throughout this study, it is noted that it is the principal who most often initiates a change of topic in the meeting talk, and who in fact determines what the topic will be. The phase of meeting talk discussed in the previous section continues as Chris proceeds with the principal’s ‘approval’. Chris’s talk here evidences many of the attributes identified throughout this study as pertaining to “expert talk”. He uses long, prosaic, well-constructed sentences; he refers several times to his close knowledge of the new Mathematics syllabus being developed at the state level and his involvement in that work; he talks about the acceptance of his project by a number of other schools and names these schools; and he demonstrates a high level of technical competence in his descriptions of the computer hardware involved and how it is used in the project.

243 Chris Two kids (0.5) Yeah, that was Burra, they've spent a lot of money on their lap-top system and so we want (0.5) which we (0.5) we actually applied to try and buy through the university fifteen lap-tops that we could take around (1.0) ah, to schools to run this program so you can run a whole class, in a lot manner. But if you'd like to be involved in that=

244 Meg Sounds fantastic=

245 P =[We'd be interested=

246 Chris =|and (0.5) we'd be very very (1.0) and (0.5) because we want to implement (.). the new syllabus, (1.0) in fact (1.0) Eva has taken our students some students to produce some work and we ran an in-service using the students with teachers and we're gonna do some more of it. Tell you about that next= ((Phase 6))

247 P =I think that's important bringing in the students as an important component too=

248 Chris =Eva is taking the material and wants to put it on the CD-Roms that go out with the new syllabus. So we're seeing it as the development of materials with Open Access.

249 (2.0)

250 P With Alec and Jen and Jim and, we've (.). we've just about covered every aspect of a (0.5) you know a school/university Professional Development School relationship except (0.5) probably the one about um (1.5) teacher educa .. pre-service teacher education students

251 Chris Yep

252 P And (3.0)I mean that (1.0) without having to (1.0) um
The talk of this long phase comes to a comparatively abrupt end when the principal once again initiates a change of topic. Chris gives a small clue that his extended contribution is coming to an end with his pre-closing comment (turn 246),

The principal is quick to sense this hint of closure, and immediately interrupts Chris with a statement that provides a link directly into the topic of the next phase (turn 247):

Chris completes the sentence he had begun before the principal interrupted him, and this is followed by a long, two second pause – a clear signal by Chris that he knows he has finished his intervention and by the principal that this segment of the meeting has concluded. No other participant takes this opportunity to take the floor, apparently waiting for the principal’s expected resumption with the new topic. The principal (turn 247) now takes the floor and uses it to control his version of the agenda. He recapitulates the activities of the partnership, acknowledging the existing partnership activity and the participants who have been involved in it. The topic change is achieved in just two turns by the principal. Chris remains connected to the talk for two very small contributions, one of “Yep” (turn 251), and one of “Mm” (turn 253), after which he is not heard from until the exchange that closes the meeting several minutes later.

Conclusion

The principal’s participation in the partnership activity observed in this study is central. While other studies do report the roles that principals play in enabling, supporting and even sponsoring partnership (Millwater & Yarrow, 2001; Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000), few if any previous studies show how the principal can actually accomplish the category-bound work of leading the partnership work through co-constructing with the other participants the attributes of leadership. In this study the principal shows how this occurs in every phase of every meeting through his involvement in initiating the partnership through to his management of it.

However leadership, as I have claimed, is not confined to designated leaders. Leadership is an activity, and in this study its enactment is seen and heard to be distributed among the various groups of participants. Some activities that help to accomplish leadership among these participants are taking up invitations to talk without hesitation, offering support and mentorship to peers, taking the initiative when opportunities to contribute to
the group’s learning occur, and even proposing and effecting topic changes. Teachers need to be and can be shown to be learners, but they also need to be leaders – not only of the children in their classes but among their peers and co-participants in work such as this partnership. This study has provided an opportunity to see how teachers, pre-service interns and academics can participate in leadership activity as part of the activity of accomplishing partnership. It has also shown how designated leaders, and in particular in this instance the principal of the school, can sometimes be seen to manage the partnership activities, though this level of management may not always be conducive to optimal participation by all.

REFERENCES


