Researching the relationships in the Technologies of Self: Habitus and Capacities

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Abstract
In this ontological research into teaching engagement with a website as a teaching tool we have used the instrument of pronoun grammar analysis (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990) to focus more clearly on the production of persons and practices in concrete interactions than is apparent in the ‘community of practice’ research after Lave and Wegner (1991). This requires a focus on the practical discursive reasoning that people use to perform operations on themselves or on other things to transform their habits or character. The ongoing discursive process is not determinate; it is influenced by the history of interactions and the kinds of storylines that are afforded to grade four students and their teachers in interaction with real-time software images of the earth in space. People act out their perception of their position, in the local moral, which has been shaped by their interpretation of the histories of the site and which creates and contributes to their sense of ‘oughtness’. The institutional goals and beliefs are enacted interpretations of the local moral order while the basis for understanding people’s agency and intentionality can be found in social rhetoric, and in the practices and conversations of the institution. The ontological phenomenological reality of the lived world can be seen to be formed in these discursive practices and can be better understood by careful consideration of them.

Setting the scene

This paper listens to the sotto voce, the quiet voice, beneath a conversation between the three primary teachers and a researcher. The discussion is ostensibly about collaboratively researching the use of a website in teaching about the earth in space to eight and nine year old students. This paper codes the everyday language of the participants, and in doing so seeks to mark the conversations in such way that we can identify where the website material is located in the everyday culture of the primary school and in its institutional practices. We also attend to the societal rhetoric and how an individual’s personal positioning is encompassed in these discursive practices. It is anticipated that coding the conversation will help us to understand how these teachers use their knowledge of what is valued in their institution in ways that may assist them to achieve specific and identifiable ends. The decision to track the changes in the use of the pronoun in these everyday conversations will indicate the interrelations and power changes in this community of practice, in relation to the tacit practices and the social rhetoric.
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The primary school teachers had come together to discuss how they each might use a website with which they had all had experience teaching with previously. The analysis of the semiotic interactions in this conversation helps to make determinate what entities these teachers perceived are influential in their setting. Once the entities are identified then it informs an understanding of what influences the decision making processes and an understanding of why some suggestions are accepted and other rejected. In conversation these entities were used by teachers to explain and justify how and why teaching events and practices will or will not occur.

‘Oughtness’ influences discursive practices

In this meeting, a senior teacher negotiates the dialectic of praxis between the self-as-product of social positioning and the self-as-process and as cultural agent. That is, what others expect of me and what I would like to do or I am capable of doing. People speak and act from a sense of ‘oughtness’ (Linehan and McCarthy, 2000). This means that is what ‘we’, in this institution, as teachers, perceive ‘we’ ought to be doing. The pronouns are used and act as an index and locate the power of certain entities in the institution. This begins to indicate the degree to which they are valued and have influence in a community of practice. These entities are recognizable and identified in the following dialogue as literacy, gifted education, student research, small group activities and the integrated curriculum. These entities have causal power in this conversation. The discursive focus of pronoun grammar analysis affords this research a more dynamic understanding of the psychological space in which science education, utilizing technologies, maybe located in primary education in contrast to the more static attribution of power to reified entities in the teacher, such as ‘low confidence’ or ‘lack of conceptual knowledge’. The coding, and analysis, of the pronoun grammar successfully marks where in the conversation the location of the techno-science is made determinate, and what value the entity is perceived to hold. In this paper we use techno-science because the relationship between the science and the technology in schools is perceived to be a close one. The technology makes clear, is woven with and contributes to, the field of science and as such contributes to an enhanced understanding of science. Science and technology often have blurred boundaries and can be both distinct and complimentary areas of study.

A meeting took place between the researcher (R) and three teachers to discuss how the teachers would proceed to use an internet website in their upcoming unit. One of these was a senior teacher(ST1), leading a large group of teachers and the other two teachers (T2 and T3) both lead smaller teams, which made up the senior teacher’s group (ST1).

In the meeting, the researcher (R) inquired of the three teachers (ST1, T2 and T3)

R So, none of you are planning to use it (the website) in your classrooms? Is that…?

The senior teacher responded,

ST1 Um, Oh I was hoping to, but it is just too difficult to try and fit it in and yeah… I was going to try and fit it in as part of a reading thing…like just make it a whole guided reading session that each group would have their
own… something based at their own level, which is something, you, you’d, it would really be a great thing to do, you know, you could use big books at the same time, and um, and you could use a whole heap of things, but, just the time, I, you’d have to plan something like that, very well, so that you could have your groups working on things that they were capable of doing, and the other, and then the kids at the other end, the extension kids, could really go ahead and, I mean research things, you know, using this site, so yeah, that would be a great way to use it, I reckon.

The use of the computer to teach science had not been referred to in this dialogue. The potential contribution of the website to develop a science understanding was not specifically discussed. The science content of the website’s images was not included in this vision of teaching practice. Instead the entities of literacy, gifted education, student research, small groups and integration of curriculum had causal power in this conversation.

This segment from the discussion showed how the teachers responded to the spoken and unspoken challenges and how the speaker utilised spoken and unspoken codes of acceptable teaching practice to strengthen their place in the conversation. Harré (1990) would term these as ‘grammars’. Grammars are the duties and rights of the community members that are embedded in the social cultural history and practices of the institution. These rights and duties can be spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten and permeate the daily events and practices of the individuals. The ‘self’ can be seen to be historically and linguistically constructed in these semiotic interactions, and not just in the immediate linguistic interchange, but in the ritualised and reified institutional practices of the past.

The role of the unwritten Social Cultural History

Activities and practices are co-produced and sustained and challenged discursively in the everyday interactions and relations of participants. Particular signs are produced, reproduced and responded to and accepted and rejected in the daily discursive practices. These discursive practices indicate both the perceptions of a community and its individuals as it is in these discursive practices that people calibrate their perceptions of the social cultural history of a particular community. These individual teachers are active constructors and part of their institution’s history and identity and importantly each teacher has their own particular form of identity, history and social emotional structure. Within a community, individuals are defined and redefined through their shared discursive experiences, and so, eventually through and in, their shared history. The self becomes a product of and in the community.

As teachers discuss their practical teaching acts, ‘set by prior customs, that is, institutionalised sets of social activities’ (Burkitt, 2002, p 227) then the particular discursive practices can be coded and identified. Taking what Foucault (1988) called the ‘technologies of self’ discursive practices can be used consciously or unconsciously, but nevertheless purposefully, to support or defend their quest for competence. In these discursive and concrete interactions individuals use their understanding of the ‘kinds of storylines that the community has produced and through which selves are enacted’
(Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p 442) to construct and reconstruct themselves individually according to their perception, acceptance or rejection of a community’s values.

The teachers in this study had already acknowledged that student web research activities are a valued practice, and now this entity is used by T3, to provide weight to and justify their argument. It is T3’s preferred teaching option to use half groups should be involved in the upcoming teaching with the website rather than with a whole class.

T3 No, well, when they …our kids come in half, half the class come, just, just with a lesson with ‘computer teacher’ so… you know, they haven’t really done a lot of work, on websites, you know, for research, and that sort of thing.

The use of the phrase ‘you know’ had actively been used to position listeners to agree with the speaker. The success of this tactic only becomes evident in the outcomes of the discussion. T3 had used the previously accepted understanding of ‘student research’ as a powerful entity to strengthen the argument now being presented. This is an appropriate use of a legitimate symbol to sustain their power for the actions and outcomes being sought by T3.

T3 now proceeded to use the already acknowledged efficacy of integrated teaching to support a preference for the use of half groups. This was likely to be successful as it had already been used in this conversation and had been affirmed as an acceptable way of teaching in this institution. The concept of ‘half groups’ had also been used previously discussed and reified in this conversation as a recognised way of handling techno-science.

T3 But I suppose if it fits in with the topic we could, sort of, um integrate it, somehow, you know, talk to ‘computer teacher’ about the possibility of when they come to computer, you know, their half groups, they come in five, six now, in half groups.

Again, the phrase ‘you know’ was utilised to imply that these ideas of ‘integrated curriculum’ and ‘half groups’ were acceptable and familiar to the others. This created a sense that no further illumination was needed as everyone understood and accepted this testimony. But again the efficacy of this statement only becomes evident in later events and future practices of the members of this community. The need to be using an integrated approach to curriculum was used as another symbolic and powerful entity to provide legitimization for a suggestion. At this point in the conversation ‘half groups’ were not accepted.

What was valued in this school was being signed in the conversation and the culture reproduced/remembered this, in their discursive practices, and this could be used to support arguments and challenge differences of opinions. This conversation points to the local moral order of rights and duties that were embedded in this particular school’s community of practice. Mühlhäusler and Harré term this idea of a system of rights, duties and obligations the ‘moral order’. A convenient way of expressing the details of a moral order is to assign people to roles. A ‘role is a coherent set of conventions of speech and
action by reference to which a person can be seen as behaving in an orderly fashion, in particular with respect to the activities of others’ in their group or institution’ (Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990, p 29).

A continuing and recognisable sense of ‘oughtness’ permeated this discussion, implying that these individuals were constantly adjusting to a set of clearly perceived and accepted order of responses. They were clear about their roles and their duties and there was an identifiable sense of oughtness, which permeated the conversation. The practices that are represented in the conversations of these teachers are accepted by them, but this does not mean they remain constantly unchallenged. Social representations are not simply impressed upon us without the possibility of debate, opposition or refusal (Howarth, 2001, p 235). Some practices had been raised and dismissed as not what we ‘ought’ to do.

**The use of aspects of Technologies of Self to meet ones’ needs**

Humans are constantly reconstructing themselves through various processes and the tools that are readily available to them to deal with problems or social needs. Individuals use tools such as language and actions to continually reconstruct themselves. Conversations provide people with opportunities that allow speakers and listeners to define and redefine themselves. Foucault saw the self as a shifting and temporary construction (Burkitt, 2002). People can be seen to be continually reconstructing themselves according to their often unconscious, yet still perceived demands of a situation or institution.

Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self* (Burkitt, 2002) assists understanding of the discursive practices of these individuals that informs and shapes the ways that they could plan to teach in this particular school setting. Interpretations of Foucault’s term *Technologies of the Self* vary, but the core premise in this study is that individuals are constantly redefining themselves, against their interpretations of the accepted practices and perceived reified entities. These valued entities contribute to a pervasive sense of oughtness, about what people should be doing and what will need to be able to be justified, and people use what they understand are the valued entities, at any point in time.

The self is constantly being communicated through the daily interactions people have with each other. Through monitoring the ‘self’, through the processes of the ‘technologies of self’, the defining and redefining of the social and individual self is seen to be constantly adjusting. Conversations provide rich insights into the values that are shaping the personas being brought forward. What is valued in an institution is clearly apparent in the conversations, in how people talk about what they do, in how they justify their practices, and in what influences what they think they can do and what they will attempt to do.

**Reified and tacit practices are evident in the conversation**

In the following dialogue we hear how tacit practices are acknowledged, highlighted and then settled. T3 teacher responded to a question about the arrangement for IT
(Information Technology) classes and both participants respond immediately to particular words before T3 completed the answer.

- T2 Who looks after your, your other half?
- T3 No, well, when they come for… their normal IT (interrupted)
- T2 Oh
- ST1 mmm, mmm.
- T3 No, well, when they …our kids come in half…

Once ST1 and T2 heard the words ‘normal IT’ they responded instantly because then they understood that this was an agreed practice in the school and not an exception. Therefore, it did not challenge the rights of all teachers, which can be assumed to say that each teacher was to have the same structure for their IT teaching. This was acceptable, and it was agreed and this was the normal approach that was fair and equitable to all. It was not documented officially, but it was accepted as an unwritten and unspoken code of rights. Unspoken and yet, heard in the *sotto voce*.

In this next section of conversation the agreed form of rights to access computers appeared to have been violated.

- T3 um, mmm, how many computers have you got in your rooms?
- ST1 Four.
- T3 Have you! In each room?
- ST1 No, well, no, not in each room. We’ve, well we’ve set up little labs.

Here ST1 qualified the access to the four computers in the phrase ‘little labs’ and then in the next sentence with the use of ‘just, only just,’ and ‘though.’

- ST1 But, but that’s, that’s just, only just, happened for me, though, this term.

It appeared rights had been transgressed, and ST1 responded to a need to explain the breach and qualified this infringement in the form of increased computer access to T3. Again, another unwritten and unspoken code of rights had been contravened; it seemed that all teachers must have the same access to materials. T3’s actions can be understood through the technologies of self, as a way to bring back a sense of equilibrium for the self, care of the self, and so ‘extra’ rights in the special form of computer access were made clear to occur for T3 as well.

- T3 …when they come to computer, you know, their half groups, they come in five, six now, in half groups.

This unknown additional information had now been offered by T3 and it was used as a tool to redefine self. So it appeared that T3 was also now seen to be having access to special rights. It was an equalizer in the conversation. There were several moments of disturbed rhythm in the conversation. Individuals were checking and assessing the rights each had exercised.

Wenger’s (1998) conceptualization of a ‘community of practice’ as individuals in social groups, who are forming and reforming their identities through their practices, aligns with
Foucault’s technologies of the self. These individuals defined and redefined themselves through their active participation in this community and appeared to be always seeking to appropriately fit into the situation as they perceived it.

Individuals perceive a situation and respond based on their experience of similar situations and the value system operating in their social cultural setting. In this responsive process the individual’s identity is defined and redefined ‘through negotiation of the meanings of our experience of membership in communities’ (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p 438). Individuals continually interpret both what matters to them, and what does not matter and then respond in language and actions to their interpretations of the shifting and changing scenarios. This system of values is inculcated into the actions of its members and accepted behaviors are not questioned, challenged or likely to be discussed. The use of positioning theory and pronoun grammar analysis supports attention to the inner voices of the participants, as ‘social meaning appears only in the use of language in joint action’ (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990, p 46).

The meeting could have focused on how the website would support their teaching, but the discussions never ventured that way and instead seemed to be mainly concerned with ‘oughtness’, and with the management and organization of the practical aspects of the teaching. The meeting showed that the teachers needed time to consider the range of options available to them.

Questions the teachers raised included whether they would teach in their own classrooms or in the school’s computer lab and they also considered the structural options of teaching in small groups or in half grades or whole grades. The meeting was mostly concerned with these types of issues. They wondered when the computer lab would be able to be accessed by them and how often. To introduce this website required consideration of many management and organizational aspects and took time to work through. This ‘time to plan’ is an important aspect of teaching that needs to be considered when teachers are required to change aspects of their teaching.

The questions that were raised led to decisions needing to be made and teachers had choices and these became a significant focus of the meeting. The teachers exercised their choices. Yet it became apparent that these choices had to fit into a range of acceptable practices. The valued practices often appeared to be more implicit than explicit. Practices became explicit at significant points in the meeting, notably when the aspects of the practices appeared to be perceived as inequitable, and then these entities required further discussion. Discursive practices appear to have become the invisible threads that provide an accountability structure and are reified social objects that are parts of the everyday narratives and from which people can make choices.

The teachers incorporated accepted narratives or storylines into their planning meeting and used these storylines about their practices to negotiate with or challenge other practices. The first storyline was raised in the first minute. It referred to the ‘crowded curriculum’ and made the point that the teaching time available was already busy and this implied that additional material to teach would not be popular decision.
It became apparent that the way the website would be used for teaching would be connected to a teacher’s understanding of their ‘rights and duties’. The teachers did not have equal rights. They also did not have equal responsibilities and duties.

In this ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of symbolic interactions, people could use their understanding of the ‘kinds of storylines that the community has produced and through which selves are enacted’ (Linehan and McCarthy, 2000, p 422). Consciously or unconsciously, and against this master discourse, which are referred to as grammars by Harré (1999), ‘set by prior customs, that is, institutionalised sets of social activities’ (Burkitt, 2002, p 227), we see that people sought to meet their needs in the ways they deemed most appropriate, and through their understanding of reified entities, and their rights and duties in the local moral order.

What teachers presented in this meeting, and in their conversations, were accounts of their actual/possible acts/actions and not simply mental representations. These accounts, they were assured, could be challenged and confronted as social representations which were not simply impressed upon them without the possibility of debate, opposition or refusal (Howarth, 2001, p 236); but their needs might remain. In this meeting challenges were aimed at individuals who sought to change something, or do something different from what was initially deemed as ‘normal’ practices. The institutional site was seen to have established practices, in the forms of arrangements, purposes and beliefs and people were perhaps expected to embrace these, not challenge them. These components were the ‘arrangements of people, artifacts, organisms, and things…. human lives hang together not just through activity and what governs it, but also through arrangements that encompass, as well as physical connections among, both specific entities in and the layouts of material settings. These arrangements and connections are features of the wider arrangements amid which humans act (Schatzki, 2000, p 25).

The results of this meeting about organization and planning for teaching were directly impacted on by the organization, layout and physical arrangements of the site. Davis and Sumara (1997) would recognize the ‘general’, and predominately tacit ‘understandings’ about how things were to be done. As in many conventional school settings, these understandings were cast in a ‘language of production, and they were evidenced in the pervasive concerns for efficient use of time’ (p 114).

In this research, it had been useful to understand the place of the person, in the setting, amidst the social cultural historical of tacit knowledge and practices (Polanyi, 1958/1974). People make strong commitments to beliefs and notable tensions arise when beliefs are challenged or interrogated. These teachers left some of their practices unjustified and unchanged. They would perhaps say ‘we can know more than we can tell’ (Polanyi, 1967, p 4). The reasons for their practices were not discussed nor considered in this social episode, but rather they faced the consequences and implications and dealt with these and managed them. The ‘overcrowded’ curriculum, lack of time and busyness were not explained, challenged or confronted, but managed.
Conclusion

Institutions plan for and experience change. This paper demonstrates how individual teachers may exercise choice and how the understanding and use of reified entities may assist success in changing practices. When change becomes necessary, for whatever reason, choices exist; although they may not always be recognised. Three teachers met to discuss and negotiate ways they could add a website into their existing teaching practices. The teachers anticipated a need to change aspects of their previous teaching approaches and they did not all agree on what changes would be needed or were appropriate, as their grades, resources and organizational structures for teaching differed. Each person operated in response to their own understanding and perception of the institutional structure and which of the school’s practices were most valued, and what would work in their specific area of the school’s structure. Significantly it had become evident that these people understood their rights and duties and the relation of their rights and duties to the efficacy and value of particular practices. These practices were tacit, and did not need edification or elaboration in the meeting. As the potential changes surfaced people were confronted with challenging changes of particular practices. How practices were negotiated and managed by individuals and groups while maintaining the valued institutional practices can be more easily identified and understood using personal grammar analysis and an understanding of the local moral order made up of grammars and positions. Positioning Theory (Harré, 1999) informs pronoun grammar analysis as a tool.

Positioning Theory assisted and contributed to an enhanced understanding of the way a person might be thinking, perceiving and feeling about their encounter with an artifact in this case a website. It allowed the relationship the person had at that moment in time to be tracked. The changes in the relationship to the topic under discussion were able to be coded and aligned with the relative practices at particular moments in the conversation. The premise in this study lies in the concept that what people say is reflective of their view of the world at that specific moment. The specific moment is influenced by a range of factors and this includes past institution practices and the person’s recollection of these experiences. People perceive themselves in the conversation as positioned by the social, cultural, historical and psychological space as they interpret it (Linehan and McCarthy, 2000).

To better understand the changing relationship a person may have with an artifact in a conversation one must consider, what has also been ‘said and done’ at the site in the past. It is also important to note that a person or people do not have to accept a position; the position can be accepted, rejected, negotiated or challenged in conversation.

People act out their perceptions of their position, in the local moral order, that has been shaped by their interpretation of the histories of the site and which creates and contributes to their sense of ‘oughtness’. In a community’s interpretations of the local moral order lie the institutional goals and beliefs and these will be heard in the social rhetoric. When the discursive practices of a community of practice are examined, that is the ‘doings and sayings’ of its members, there too can be found the basis for understanding the individual’s agency and intentionality. The ontological and phenomenological reality of
the lived world *formed* in these discursive practices and can be better understood by considering them. The reified practices are the social rhetoric, the way we talk about ourselves and our institution and they impact powerfully on the day to day practices of its members. The reified practices also indicate what is valued, how highly it is valued, and therefore, which practices will be difficult to change.

**References**