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The Ideological Dilemmas Inherent in Informal Learning Spaces: A Discourse Analysis of Preservice Teacher Talk

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Abstract

Informal learning spaces, such as summer reading programs, have the potential to both motivate children and provide opportunities for preservice teachers to try out new practices. However, there is little research on the talk that occurs in these informal learning spaces, particularly those intended to function as third spaces. Audio recordings of meetings between preservice teachers and high school students talking together about young adult literature in a space intended to function as a third space were analyzed to explore how discourse choices shaped the participants' practices. We found that the participants both resisted and reproduced the traditional classroom in their talk, suggesting that the successful design of third spaces is a complex endeavor.

Keywords

Discourse Analysis, Classroom Talk, Informal Learning, Reading Groups

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The Ideological Dilemmas Inherent in Informal Learning Spaces: A Discourse Analysis of Preservice Teacher Talk

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Informal learning spaces, such as summer reading programs, have the potential to both motivate children and provide opportunities for preservice teachers to try out new practices. However, there is little research on the talk that occurs in these informal learning spaces, particularly those intended to function as third spaces. Audio recordings of meetings between preservice teachers and high school students talking together about young adult literature in a space intended to function as a third space were analyzed to explore how discourse choices shaped the participants' practices. We found that the participants both resisted and reproduced the traditional classroom in their talk, suggesting that the successful design of third spaces is a complex endeavor. Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Classroom Talk, Informal Learning, Reading Groups

Classroom conversations have long been a topic of research, with findings highlighting inherent patterns in this type of institutional talk (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Two common themes regarding classroom discourse patterns have emerged from this research: the prevalence of monologic talk and a heavy emphasis on the initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) pattern, both of which can be used to establish control and/or position students in ways that set up a cultural model of learning that privileges the teacher. Much research has described classroom talk as including a lecture format and/or a pedagogic cycle (Arminen, 2005), also known as the initiate-evaluation/feedback (IRE/F) pattern (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). In lecture talk, students are often expected to be silent and listen. Within the IRE/F pattern, a teacher typically asks the students a question after which students give a response. The pedagogic cycle is then closed once the teacher evaluates or provides feedback on the student's response.

While, as Bloome (1994) noted, the IRE sequence may help students learn what they are supposed to know, it can also inhibit students' participation in both teacher-student and student-student interactions, which can sometimes result in missed opportunities for students to produce their own knowledge and understandings (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997). Breaking away from monologic (and IRE) patterns can be difficult, especially at a time when American teachers are being asked to ensure that their students *know* particular concepts in order for them to pass high-stakes tests. Christoph and Nystrand's (2001) study of a high school English teacher found that even when she consciously tried to be dialogic, her teaching style remained predominantly top-down. Authentic discussions were infrequent due to "state-mandated curricular expectations, the unknown potential of what students might say and conflicts that might arise, and unwillingness to try new and challenging ways of teaching" (p. 278).

In addition, according to Johannessen and Kahn (2005), because students have been

exposed to the IRE pattern so often during their schooling, they come to expect that this is how classroom discussions should be run. Mercer and Edwards (1981), from their work with British schoolchildren, termed these types of patterns the “educational ground-rules;” that is, the unwritten rules of classroom talk and practice (as cited in Edwards & Mercer, 1987, p. 47). Furthermore, Dong (2008) found that avoiding monologic discussions created a dilemma for student teachers because “on the one hand, they want to encourage participation,” while “...on the other hand, many feel the urge to establish their authority and control” (p. 231). Yet, in terms of understanding interaction in small group or one-on-one settings, the research is scarce, as we know far less about discourse practices in small groups and informal or alternate spaces, particularly those designed to be *third spaces* (Gutierrez, 2008).

In this article, we report findings from a discourse analysis of literature discussion groups comprised of high school students and preservice teachers in a voluntary summer reading program created for students attending a high-need school. This study was shaped both theoretically and methodologically by discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), which is a perspective that allows an analyst to consider what discourse is *doing* and *performing* at a micro-level. Furthermore, we used third space theory to inform how we made sense of this informal learning environment. Third space (or hybridity) theory acknowledges the multiple, cultural and discursive practices that people draw upon when making sense of themselves and the world around them (Bhabha, 1990, 1994). Further, such spaces can refer to both social (i.e., discursive) and physical spaces. Gutiérrez (2008) conceptualized the third space as “where teacher and student scripts—the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment—intersect” (p. 152). In relation to classroom talk, third spaces emerge when teachers abandon traditional monologic talk and bring students into the conversational and instructional space (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995).

Theoretically, third spaces bring together different forms of knowledge, discourse(s), and relationships, and are presumed to produce new learning, forms of discourse, and student identities (e.g., Barton, Tan, & Rivet, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004). Yet, to date, relatively few studies have examined how social actors within informal learning spaces navigate the ideological dilemma (Billig, 1996) of “doing learning” in a different way, despite pressures to perform school as usual. Thus, the purpose of this study was guided by the following research question: At the level of discourse, how do pre-service teachers go about “doing school” in an informal learning environment intended to be a *third space*? In this study, we conceptualized the notion of “doing school” as performing and/or constructing through talk that which comes to be counted as *school*.

Theoretical Framework

We positioned this study within a discursive psychology (DP) framework (Edwards & Potter, 1993), which was informed by conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1987), and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Taking up a DP perspective, at both the level of theory and methodology, we worked to engage in a detailed analysis of how the participants built the local particularities of the summer reading program in and through their conversations (Schegloff, 1992). Attending to the micro-features of the talk allowed us to situate our interpretations in broader understandings drawn from conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), a literature base and interpretative stance that heavily influences a DP orientation to discourse analysis work (Potter, 2012). More particularly, we took note of the ways in which the participants worked to co-construct this informal learning space, focusing on how the participants negotiated the challenges and ideological dilemmas inherent to its construction.

Method

Context

The data for this study was drawn from a larger project, which entailed a three-week summer program designed to help high school students complete their required summer reading (*Sold* by Patricia McCormick, 2006 and *Copper Sun* by Sharon Draper, 2008). This summer program was held on the campus of a university in the southeast region of the United States and ran concurrently with a month-long young adult (YA) literature course taught by the second author, Scherff. She created the program in 2007 to provide support to students attending high-need schools. This summer reading program was designed to be different from typical remedial programs. For instance, most summer offerings for high school students are structured much like a traditional summer school program, where students re-take courses from the past year to make up course credits. In contrast, this summer program was intended to be a learning space where students and teachers could break out of their traditional roles and escape (or at least minimize) the power dynamics of grades and assessments in order to try out new ways of interacting with each other (Scherff, 2012, 2015). One of its main goals was for preservice teachers to get collaborative hands-on teaching experience by planning, teaching, and debriefing in teams.

During the first week of the course, Scherff worked with the sixteen participating preservice teachers as they read and discussed the two selected books; learned about teaching activities; examined critical literacy and literary theories in relation to the books; created discussion questions; talked about the goals of the program; and discussed how to engage students with the books through creative writing, games, etc. The preservice teachers were also told that the students' first grade of the fall semester would be a 50-100 question (multiple choice and true false) quiz on the book, perhaps immediately setting up a dilemma within this learning space. The outside pressures to *do school as usual* still existed. Regardless, the preservice teachers were highly encouraged to discuss the text using critical literacy and literary theory(ies), rather than relying on low-level, test-like questions (Scherff, 2011, 2015).

To the extent possible, Scherff gave control of the planning and instruction of the reading program to the preservice teachers, emphasizing that this program was not like a required field experience; they were not going to be evaluated on their teaching or lesson plans. Moreover, the preservice teachers were given extensive time to collaboratively plan; Mondays and Wednesdays were for planning and debriefing and Tuesdays and Thursdays were for meeting with the students to talk about the books.

In order to keep the teacher to student ratio as close to 1:1 as possible, the preservice teachers (n=16) divided themselves into two groups, with 11 opting to teach *Sold* to the 18 ninth graders, and the remaining five teachers working with the seven tenth graders on the novel *Copper Sun*. The teachers who focused on *Sold* then split up further, with each teacher working with one or two students. This way, instructional time could be differentiated among 1:1, small group, and whole group discussions. Teachers were provided with digital audio recorders to record all of their planning, instruction, and debriefing sessions. In this paper, we report on the findings from our analysis of the talk of the preservice teacher-student groups who were working with the novel *Sold*. See Table 1 and Table 2 for more detailed descriptions of the participants (pseudonyms are used throughout).

Table 1. Teacher Demographics

Teacher	Gender	Race
Kasey	Female	White
Jodi	Female	White
Kevin#	Male	White
Michelle#	Female	White
Andrew*	Male	White
Kim	Female	White
Candace	Female	Black
Jessalyn	Female	White
Reesha	Female	Black
Wade	Male	White
Robert#	Male	White

Kevin was a veteran science teacher at international schools taking the class on campus to complete his master's degree. Michelle and Robert were novice English teachers taking the class towards certification.

*Andrew was a preservice teacher in foreign language education.

Table 2. Student Demographics

Student	Gender	Race
Andy	Male	White
Krissy	Female	White
Mischa	Female	Latina
Ashley	Female	Black
Mark	Male	Black#
Cole	Male	Black
Brad	Male	White
Dee Dee	Female	Black
Jennifer	Female	White
June	Female	Black
Richard	Male	Black
Tisha	Female	Black
Todd	Male	White
Anne	Female	White
Dante	Male	Black
Nico	Male	Black
Ed	Male	Black
Walt	Black	Male

Most students self-identified as Black (not African American).

Data Collection and Analysis

Upon research approval by the university, consent and assent forms were distributed and collected; then Scherff and the preservice teachers collected data over the three-week program. Data for the present study consisted of ten audio-recorded conversations. Recordings that were inaudible or incomplete were not included in the analysis.

We focused our analysis around the ways in which the participants went about navigating the ideological dilemmas (Billig, 1987) inherent to an informal learning space. As a research team, we collaborated in carrying out an iterative six-step analysis process in which we:

- 1) transcribed the audio data verbatim;
- 2) added transcription symbols, using a modified style (Jefferson, 2004) to highlight key aspects of the interactions (see Appendix A for transcription symbols);
- 3) engaged in repeated listenings of the audio files and readings of the transcripts;
- 4) selected and organized the discursive patterns and features as informed by conversation analysis and DP, specifically as related to ideological dilemmas;
- 5) generated interpretations of the discursive patterns grounded in conversation analysis methods; and
- 6) reflexively and transparently documented our claims.

Throughout, we utilized the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.tiTM6 to organize and annotate the data, using the memo and coding features. To warrant our claims, we followed the recommendations of Antaki, Billing, Edwards, and Potter (2003), wherein they suggested avoiding under-analyzing by summarizing the data or presenting multiple extracts with little analysis. In other words, to validate our research findings, we sought to illustrate our analysis by offering a line by line interpretation of the extracts.

Findings

Across the conversations, we noted two patterns, generated in intersecting ways, being produced and managed by the participants as they engaged with each other:

- 1) resisting school, and
- 2) reproducing school.

More specifically, we noted that a primary *action* across the discourse was to construct the summer reading program as “fun” and “not like school,” which worked to resist “doing school” as usual, while simultaneously taking up other discursive strategies that reproduced school as usual. In other words, despite the discursive move away from the usual *school technologies* (e.g., daily or weekly testing), the majority of the participants at some point in their talk reproduced the institutional discourses associated with the practice of schooling. We oriented to the production of both resisting school and reproducing school as making evident the key ideological dilemmas (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988) faced when attempting to design an informal learning space, particularly one intended to serve as a third space. In this case, the dilemma was generated in relation to contrasting ideologies in education

between child-centered instruction (progressive education) and the authority of the curriculum that must be mastered (traditional education).

Resisting School

It's going to be fun! Across the talk, we noted that the preservice teachers often emphasized that the summer reading program would be “fun” and “not like school.” Throughout, the teachers reassured the students that they themselves really liked *Sold* and hoped and/or reassured the students that they too would “like the book.” There were frequent reminders that the goal of the summer reading program was to “have fun.”

In Excerpt 1, Robert, one of the teachers, performed a great deal of discursive work to accomplish this action.

Excerpt 1

- 1 *Robert*: Are ya'll nervous? Do I look nervous? Well, I want you to relax
- 2 because this is going to be fun. You're not going to have tests. Now does
- 3 that make you relax? Huh? Not going to ask you to do anything that you
- 4 don't wanna do. Now we are going to read the book, and I want you to
- 5 enjoy it. I've read this book and I really liked it and I want you to like it.

As illustrated in Excerpt 1, across the data set teachers made evident their assumption that the students did not normally orient to school or reading as inherently fun. As such, the teachers worked to show how the summer reading program would be different from school. Robert made relevant what the students will *not* have: “You're not going to have tests” (line 2), an activity traditionally associated with “doing school.” His next move emphasized that the students would not be asked to do anything they “don't wanna do” (line 4), setting up a contrast between the summer reading program and what is presumably expected in a typical classroom environment (i.e., tests, things you don't want to do, etc.). Yet, even after this reassurance, Robert followed up with: “Now we are going to read...”, which positioned the reading activity as non-negotiable. In this way, the dilemma of “doing school” versus having fun was made evident. Even while the teacher moved to position the activity as “not school,” he had to navigate the challenge of meeting the institutional goal/expectations of reading the book. Thus, even as the teacher worked to minimize the formality of the summer reading program, he reproduced it as well.

We noted that many of the teachers, like Robert, emphasized that the summer reading program would be driven by what the students *wanted* to do. This orientation to the students' “wants” pointed to the possibilities inherent in third spaces; yet because the book had already been selected by the teachers and the students were being directed to read it, the possibilities were not yet fulfilled. More specifically, the desired student-driven orientation to “doing reading” created possibilities for a space in which the teacher's authority was decentered, which we examine next.

Minimizing teacher authority. Another way that the preservice teachers resisted the institutional aspect of “doing school” was by minimizing their stake and interest (Potter Edwards, & Wetherell, 1993) in teaching English, at times by minimizing their roles as experts, as illustrated in Excerpt 2 by Kevin, another teacher.

Excerpt 2

- 1 *Kevin*: Like I said, I'm not an English teacher, so I don't really=I like to

- 2 read a lot, I'm a big reader I read for fun, but uh I don't=I don't know like
- 3 the (.) so this is good for you in a way because I'm not gonna make=I'm
- 4 not going to ask you any English teacher type questions <<laughs>>
- 5 because I don't know 'em, <<laughs>>

In Excerpt 2, Kevin began by minimizing his own role as an expert, stating: "I'm not an English teacher" (line 1). By distancing himself from being an English teacher, he more closely aligned himself with the students, particularly their presumed desire of not being asked "any English teacher type questions" (line 4); something which the students might be expecting from him. In this way, he minimized his stake in the reading task, while he distanced himself from being accountable or responsible to engage in tasks associated with being an "English teacher." Kevin further minimized his authority by claiming to not even know the answers to any such questions that might be asked (line 5). Further, as Kevin made relevant how he liked to read "for fun" (line 2), he, like other teachers, highlighted how the reading program would be fun, with "fun" defined in contrast to being asked "English teacher type questions" (line 3-4).

This move functioned to construct this particular learning space as being different from what is traditionally expected to occur in a school setting, a setting in which students would likely be asked "teacher type questions." In this way, the teachers constructed this space as different and unique from other educational environments. They were not the usual experts, nor did they intend to ask questions aligned with the expected discourses of English class. Resisting school, then, involved the teachers distancing themselves from the identity of "teacher" as they worked to center the voice of their students.

Your opinion is as important as mine. Another way that teachers worked to resist "doing school" as usual was by emphasizing to the students that their perspectives and opinions were important. In Excerpt 3, we see Andrew, a teacher, emphasizing that the students' opinions are as important as his.

Excerpt 3

- 1 *Andrew*: ...I'm taking notes on what you say because I like your opinions.
- 2 *Anne*: [laughs]
- 3 *Andrew*: Your opinions are just as important as mine. If you have an idea
- 4 about the book, they're just as important and maybe better than my ideas
- 5 cuz...I don't know what any of this is really like, and it's been a long time
- 6 since I've been thirteen [laughs] so...

Andrew began by making relevant his actions ("taking notes") and connecting this to his interest in the students' opinions. By verbalizing his nonverbal action ("taking notes"), he made visible an action that was reversing the typical classroom pattern where teachers talk and students take notes. He expanded this by highlighting his "like" for their opinions, positioning their opinions alongside his own (line 3). In this way, his talk functioned to decrease, at least at the level of discourse, the power differential inherent to student-teacher interactions. By constructing the students' opinions as "just as important" and perhaps "maybe better" than his own, he located the students' perspectives as central to the interactive process. In contrast to a traditional classroom in which the teachers' opinions are often privileged, Andrew resisted this practice.

We were also intrigued by Anne's (the student) response of laughter (line 2). In talk, laughter, as an action-oriented resource, has been shown to function as a way to add levity when reporting troubles or making complaints (e.g., Edwards, 2005), as well as a way to deal with delicate matters (e.g., Haakana, 2001) or display disbelief or perhaps surprise. In this case,

we interpreted the use of laughter as pointing to the delicate matter of sharing opinions in a school context, or disbelief or surprise of the idea of a teacher taking notes on what a student says. Students and teachers are acculturated to the practice of privileging expert (i.e., teacher) opinion; thus, to shift the privileged opinion is to shift how “school is done.” Perhaps, this attempt at a shift was surprising enough to warrant a laugh.

Not knowing/not performing is okay. Institutionalized ways of “doing school” were also resisted by reassuring the students that “not knowing is okay.” Educational discourse is grounded in the idea that students are to respond with the correct answer when presented with a teacher-posed question, with their answers displaying accurate knowledge (Johannessen & Kahn, 2005). Thus, the very act of “doing school” is based on the implicit assumption that students should come to know all that a teacher knows and share what they know when asked. Across the data, we noted that at some point all of the teachers worked to normalize “not knowing,” something that can usually be penalized through lowered grades.

In Excerpt 4, Kasey, a teacher, introduced Walt to a word scramble task:

Excerpt 4

- 1 *Kasey*: Alright, all you have to do is unscramble the words. There’s a little
- 2 bank at the bottom. Of course, the goal is to try to not use the bank, but if
- 3 you need it, go right ahead. And all it is is just some significant words
- 4 from the book.
- 5 *Walt*: Um...
- 6 *Kasey*: If you need to you can use your book, too.
- 7 *Walt*: [Working]

In Excerpt 4, Kasey began by making the goal of the task evident, yet in a way that minimized the difficulty of the task, stating in line 1: “all you have to do.” In this way, the teacher quickly minimized the challenge of the task and followed this up by pointing to a resource that could aid the student if needed (“bank at the bottom,” lines 1-2). While the goal of the task was positioned as something to do independent of the word bank, the teacher immediately let the student know it was okay to refer to that list. Furthermore, when the student responded with “Um” (line 5), Kasey immediately offered him the use of the book as another helpful resource (line 6), making it clear that he was not expected to produce the correct answer on his own.

Later in this same meeting, Kasey asked Walt to read more of the book for next time, but immediately minimized her request by offering the student an “out,” as seen in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5

- 1 *Kasey*: Alright, so for next time, cause you got the weekend to read and
- 2 we’ve already read a lot of it today, we finished at sixty-three, so start at
- 3 sixty-four and try to get to, um (...) let’s see, get to 108. And its okay if
- 4 you don’t get all the way to the end, that’s fine, cause we’ll have to do
- 5 some catchin’ up for Ed, if he comes in, um, but try to take notes as you
- 6 read and that’ll help you remember things from the book better, and be
- 7 sure to write down any questions if there is a word you don’t know or
- 8 anything like that, we can look it up and um, figure it out on Tuesday. Um,
- 9 so to 108, is that okay?

This particular excerpt illustrated a common pattern: one in which the teachers, after giving the students an assignment, immediately made it okay for them not to fulfill the expectations (lines

3-4). Here, we also highlight how the teacher positioned having the “weekend” and having “already read a lot” as justification for assigning the reading (lines 1-2). Rather than simply assigning it and assuming that the students would complete it, teachers often justified their assignments in and through their talk. Furthermore, across the data, we noted that the teachers often asked the students if their expectations were okay (line 9). Herein lies one of the dilemmas of resisting traditional schooling. Even as the students were told that they did not have to do anything they did not want to do, that the summer reading program would be fun, and that resources were available to assist them, ultimately they were being directed by the teachers to complete an assigned task. The teachers, then, while at times resisting “doing school,” also took up traditional discourse patterns that reproduced it.

Student-initiated topic shifts. Another way that the traditional ways of “doing school” were resisted was through students taking control of the conversation. While this did not happen frequently, we noted it several times in Jessalyn’s group, standing as variability within our data set. In her group, we noticed Tisha, a student, taking the lead on many of the topic initiations. Jessalyn chose to start the session differently from the other groups, by drawing. Excerpt 6 began with the first question asked by Tisha in the session after they talked about what they were drawing.

Excerpt 6

- 1 *Tisha*: Do you have any siblings?
- 2 *Jessalyn*: Yes, I do. I have an older brother.
- 3 *Tisha*: You the baby?
- 4 *Jessalyn*: No, older. Oh, well I yes, I’m the baby. He is twenty. How old is
- 5 he? Twenty four.
- 6 *Tisha*: My sister is twenty-one
- 7 *Jessalyn*: Oh, okay.
- 8 *Tisha*: So there’s like seven years apart.

In this excerpt, the student, Tisha, began by asking a typical small talk/rapport building question of Jessalyn, the teacher. These initial questions were personal (line 1), and unrelated to the book. Here, in this one-on-one setting, the teacher followed the lead of the student, in contrast to the typical classroom talk in which the teacher manages the direction of the conversation and has to align the questions with pre-set curricular goals (e.g., Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). Research on classroom talk has shown that teachers often regulate what questions are being asked and who is doing the elaboration, with students most often positioned as the one to respond to questions posed and move to elaborate when told to do so (Nystrand et al., 1997). In this case, we see a different pattern, in which the student does the questioning and elaborating, with the teacher acknowledging receipt of the new information (Heritage, 1984).

As the conversation continued, we noted Jessalyn’s attempt to shift the conversation back to discussing the book. In other words, despite the talk being predominately managed by the student, the teacher still oriented to the reading task. However, Tisha continued to initiate her own topics, with the teacher following her lead, as seen in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7

- 1 *Jessalyn*: But we’ll take about like 40 to 50 pages a day because you guys
- 2 are here like six times. And I’m telling you this book is gonna be
- 3 absolutely it’s awesome.

- 4 *Tisha*: When is like college classes, like in the evening or the morning?
- 5 Like your schedule?
- 6 *Jessalyn*: Um, both.
- 7 *Tisha*: Both, okay. Like how do you get your schedule? Like I don't know
- 8 how it feels to actually start college. Like you get the acceptance letter
- 9 through the mail and then what do you do from there?

In the above excerpt, Jessalyn had just turned the conversation back to the book by making explicit the expectation regarding how much was to be read each day (line 1). She moved then to position the book as something that would be “awesome,” using an extreme case formulation (“absolutely,” line 3) to build her case. Extreme case formulations (Edwards, 2000) like “seriously” or “absolutely”, often function to bolster the factuality of one’s claims. However, in this case, Tisha did not orient to the news of the “awesome” book as noteworthy, instead she immediately initiated a new topic about college schedules (line 4) – a shift that in a traditional school setting could be positioned as “off topic.” Unlike what is often noted in typical classroom talk, the teacher allowed the conversation to continue on the student’s terms. While the full excerpt has not been included here, the conversation went on at great length and included an exchange of detailed information about college, after which Tisha and Jessalyn returned to discuss the “awesome” book.

Reproducing School

While we have described several patterns where teachers did discursive work to resist “doing school”, we noted that such conversational moves were often followed by choices that in essence reproduced traditional ways of “doing school.” They did this through the use of traditional IRE sequences, initiating topic shifts that re-focused the talk on the task of “doing reading”, asking known-answer questions, and using what we have dubbed “school technologies” to mediate their conversations with the students.

IRE sequences. Much of traditional classroom talk can be characterized by an IRE pattern, often positioned as fundamental to the pedagogic cycle (Arminen, 2005; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Within the IRE pattern, teachers ask a question to which a student provides a response that an instructor then evaluates. Interactional research has pointed to the ways in which this pattern is often employed as a means of maintaining control in face-to-face encounters, with one figure managing the conversation (Arminen, 2005; Mehan, 1979).

With IRE sequences located as central to typical classroom talk, we were particularly interested in those conversations that fell into this expected pattern. Across the data, we noted that at some point in all of the book discussions, an IRE pattern was established. In Excerpt 8, we see Kasey’s group take up this pedagogic cycle.

Excerpt 8

- 1 *Kasey*: “Simply to endure is to triumph.” (.) What does that last line mean
- 2 to you? Do you feel like that’s significant? (3 sec)
- 3 *Walt*: Um, can you repeat that?
- 4 *Kasey*: The quote?
- 5 *Walt*: Yeah.
- 6 *Kasey*: “Simply to endure is to triumph.” (1 sec) Remember we talked last
- 7 time about the meaning of triumph. Do you think this quote is an important
- 8 or significant quote?
- 9 *Walt*: Ummm (4 sec) Yes. <<His tone suggests he is unsure>>

- 10 *Kasey*: Why is that?
 11 *Walt*: Because um (4 sec) to, to, be in a (.) bad situation, something like
 12 that, um (.) it's good to (.) overcome it.
 13 *Kasey*: Okay, alright. Very good.

In this excerpt, Kasey began by directly quoting from the book and asking two questions in a row, the first one being open ended (line 1-2) and the second one being a yes/no question (line 2). This was followed by a relatively long (three second) pause, which threatened to disrupt a smooth turn-taking sequence. Pauses or nonresponses often indicate that there is some kind of trouble or problem within the conversation itself (Pomerantz, 1984), as the preferred conversational pattern is one in which one speaker speaks at a time with little to no gap between turns. How the other speakers orient to the gap may vary, with some conversational research highlighting how such gaps could indicate a reluctance on the part of the speaker to participate (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). In this case, Walt eventually took up his turn with a hedge (“can you repeat that?” and “ummm”) – a discursive means by which uncertainty is often made visible in talk. In this way, Walt was likely displaying his uncertainty about the “correct answer” to the question being posed. When Walt eventually responded with the one word response of “yes” (line 9), Kasey requested an elaboration by asking “Why is that?” After some false starts (line 11), perhaps again displaying his uncertainty, the teacher evaluated Walt’s elaboration with an affirmation of “very good.”

This particular sequence is aligned closely with what is known about “doing school” as usual. A student responds, the teacher either immediately evaluates or asks for an elaboration, with the teacher eventually praising the response (unless it is deemed incorrect by the teacher) (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). In this way, Kasey maintained control of the conversation, serving to direct how the interaction unfolded, with the student being more of a respondent to the conversational leader than an equal participant within the conversation. This excerpt was representative of the talk in Kasey’s group – consisting of short turns by the students, repairs, delays, and other features that led to a very “stilted” feeling. This conversational sequence contrasted sharply with the ease of turn-taking between Tisha and Jessalyn’s group, as noted in Excerpt 7.

Teacher driven topic shifts. We also noted that the teachers often took very long conversational turns and/or initiated very abrupt topic shifts. Kevin (the teacher), for example, in Excerpt 9, organized his meeting with Cole around what seemed to be a pre-defined list of questions.

Excerpt 9

- 1 *Kevin*: What’s the name of that show? I think my [daughter
 2 *Cole*: The] Elephant Man.
 3 *Kevin*: Wow, that’s weird. There was another- there’s a movie called the
 4 Elephant Man too, but it’s about (.) a fictional character, that is like in the
 5 circus, you know, because he’s so weird (.) looking, and he uh, he uh
 6 never gets surgery just like has this. He’s a really nice guy, but he’s so
 7 ugly you know that no one-everyone’s afraid of him. So it’s probably like
 8 this poor guy and so uh, have you ever heard of child slavery?
 9 *Cole*: Child slavery.
 10 *Kevin*: Yeah, like modern day, not like in the old days, but modern [day,
 11 *Cole*: modern, no]
 12 *Kevin*: Like kids that have to- that are slaves?
 13 *Cole*: I’ve never heard of it.

This excerpt begins after Cole has described a show he had seen. Kevin gave his own description of a movie of the same title, but then somewhat abruptly turned the topic of the conversation back toward what was likely one of his prepared questions about *Sold*, “Have you heard of child slavery?” (Line 8). In this way, while Cole initially took the floor to share something about elephants as a related topic to Hinduism (*Sold* takes place in India), Kevin returned to the presumed topic of most importance – “child slavery” – the topic of the book. Cole repeated the words “child slavery” back to him, perhaps functioning to display his uncertainty in relation to the question being posed. Kevin and Cole then engaged in a series of repair turns before Cole finally said, “I’ve never heard of it” (line 13). This excerpt illustrates the ways in which, at times, the teachers took back control of the floor (Nystrand et al., 1997) in order to meet their own goals for the conversation.

Known answer questions. Another way in which school was reproduced across the data set was the teachers’ use of less authentic “known answer” questions that evoked traditional classroom talk. Research on classroom discourse has shown that it is common for teachers to pose questions to which they have a specific answer in mind (Cazden, 1988). Excerpt 10 illustrates this well.

Excerpt 10

- 1 *Andrew*: Tell me some things about the stepfather. (1 sec) What does he
- 2 look like? (1 sec) What’s the most distinguishing feature he has?
- 3 *Anne*: Um (2 sec) I know he had a white jacket on and a hat.
- 4 *Andrew*: Hm?
- 5 *Anne*: He had like a black jacket and a hat.
- 6 *Andrew*: Um, kind of. Actually, I was thinking about something else. Turn
- 7 to page eight.

In the above excerpt, Andrew, the teacher, began with an open ended question (line 1-2), which was quickly repaired to a more close-ended question (line 2) through the use of the phrase “most distinguishing feature” (line 2). This conversational move made relevant that there was just one right answer to the question being posed. The student’s response, “I know he had a white jacket on and a hat” (line 3), would seem to be an appropriate response for the first question; yet the teacher’s response (an inquisitive “hm,” line 4) signaled that the answer was not the one he had in mind and therefore not fully correct. Anne, the student, then changed her answer (line 5) to modify the jacket color, but this received only an, “um, kind of,” from Andrew, signaling again that the student’s response did not match the preferred response presumably known only to the teacher.

Andrew then directed Anne to “page eight” to find the answer he had in mind (“I was thinking about something else”); thus showing that the “right” answer was one only known to the teacher (lines 6-7) and also found through the use of a school resource (e.g., book). This type of pattern was one in which the power differential between the teacher and student was made visible, as the student had no way of ever knowing exactly what response the teacher wanted. The teacher, through his questioning style, is therefore positioned as the knowing authority (Nystrand et al., 1997).

School “technologies” Several teachers relied heavily upon what we labeled “school technologies” to mediate their conversations, which included such things as data gathering instruments (e.g., surveys or questionnaires) and paper-and-pencil tests. These technologies evoked the traditional classroom, rather than positioning the summer reading program as something far different than school. For example, Kevin, a teacher, began his session with Cole by asking him to fill out a reading interest inventory. Kevin ultimately used four different

instruments throughout his first meeting with Cole. Excerpt 11 illustrates one part of this initial interaction.

Excerpt 11

- 1 *Kevin*: Alright, so (.) uh what I thought I'd have you do is uh fill this out,
- 2 just the first page, so=I don't know=do you have a pen do you need a pen?
- 3 eh hh Just fill out the first page. (26 sec)
- 4 *Cole*: Uhm, I have a question.
- 5 *Kevin*: Sure.
- 6 *Cole*: What is place of birth?
- 7 *Kevin*: Yeah where were you born?

In the above excerpt, Kevin introduced this activity with language that is common in the classroom, “fill this out.” He also displayed a variation on “take out your pencils,” by stating: “do you have a pen,” which he quickly repaired to “do you need a pen” (line 2). These language choices positioned the task as an institutional one; one that required a pen and filling something out. This introductory exchange is followed by a 26 second pause during which time the student was apparently silently working on “filling out” the form. This mirrored a typical classroom scene where students work quietly at their desks on written tasks while the teacher waits.

After this lengthy pause, Cole announced that he had a question rather than simply asking it (line 4), perhaps making a bid for the conversational floor (Edelsky, 1981) by asking for the teacher’s permission to talk (as would be the case in traditional school contexts). That Cole did not understand the phrase “place of birth” further marked the form as institutional in nature and foreign to the student. The student was dependent upon clarification from an expert – in this case the teacher. The use of these instruments, then, were often institutional in scope and may have contributed to reproducing, rather than resisting the institution and all of the practices that are situated within it.

Discussion

The summer reading program was intended to create an informal learning space that could engage and motivate students, as well as provide them with the opportunity to read and discuss their required summer reading. In essence, the goal was to promote dialogic teaching, where teachers use students’ contributions to devise activities that “enable students to pursue their understanding themselves, through talk and other activity” (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 42).

Yet, as our data show, even as teachers worked to construct a space that was “not like school” and promoted dialogic teaching, other discursive strategies and patterns reinforced the “school as usual” aspect of the reading program (Gutierrez et al., 1999). For instance, while some of the reading groups exhibited student-driven topic shifts and invited students to hold the floor for longer periods of time with opportunities to inquire and comment on ideas and issues raised (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), most conversations reproduced typical school discourses through the use of IRE interaction patterns (with the teachers taking more and longer conversational turns), typical teacher questioning strategies (e.g., asking pre-determined and/or inauthentic known answer questions), and teacher controlled topic shifts. Teachers also relied on reading questionnaires and other institutional technologies to mediate their conversations with the students, infrequently moving beyond the expected ways of engaging in school. Like Eriksson’s (2002) study of in-school book clubs in Swedish schools, we found a tension between readers reading for their “own delight and the teachers’ educational task” (p. 407).

We noted here the dilemma between the desire to *motivate* the students through discourse choices that could transform the interaction into a third space, while also needing to *prepare* students for the test in the fall and being accountable for mastering the book by the time they returned to school. To foster dialogic talk, the preservice teachers needed to provide “a cumulative, continuing, contextual frame to enable students’ involvement with the new knowledge they are encountering” (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 42). However, these novice teachers faced a predicament: to prepare students through explicit instruction using low-level questions that would mirror those on the test they would face or to try to have authentic discussions about the novel that might not have one correct answer. This is a real-world dilemma that many classroom teachers face, particularly as they seek out ways by which to design third spaces for learning.

There were some missed opportunities for how the talk could have been done differently to achieve interactions that may have moved closer to a third space (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). For instance, rather than positioning the reading as something that could be done for the sheer pleasure of reading, many of the teachers used the reality (or threat) of end of summer testing as a reason to read. Bernstein (1996) claimed that pedagogic discourse functions as a “symbolic regulator of consciousness . . . for the production, reproduction, and transformation of culture” (p. 52). It is not, however, deterministic, in that the “pedagogic device” also serves as a site of challenge and opposition, “an arena of struggle between different groups for the appropriation of the device, because whoever appropriates the device has the power to regulate consciousness” (p. 52). Third spaces, then, may be such a site of struggle as pre-service teachers are caught between their duty to recontextualize and “regulate consciousness” of the students, while seeking at the same time to challenge the regulatory discourse. While not easy to foster, third spaces have the potential to shift “balance in the classroom, positioning students and teachers as colearners and coteachers,” with the “potential to reduce student resistance” and offer “a way for teachers and students to resist the pressure of harmful educational mandates” (Benson, 2010, p. 562). Reaching this potential might need to first begin with an acknowledgement of the dilemmas that it presents to those engaged in that resistance.

In the future, it may be useful to share the findings of this study with pre-service and in-service teachers, as this may make them more aware of what their talk is doing – resisting school and/or reproducing school – and reflecting on those choices may lead to new discursive choices in future conversations with students. Building in opportunities for teachers to record, listen to, and analyze their talk (and teaching) may be a good educational strategy for expanding how teachers come to pursue learning spaces that create opportunities for non-traditional forms of thinking and learning (e.g., Frank & Uy, 2004; Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007).

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Appendix A

Transcription Symbols

- (.) Denotes pauses less than one second
- = Halts and starts in speech
- Emphasis
- ↑ Raised pitch
- [] Overlapping speech
- << >> Contextual information
- XXX Unintelligible speech

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