Learning Tacit Classroom Participation

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Abstract

This article examines tacit participation in an adult art class. Drawing on video excerpts from an extensive 4 month video ethnographic study of an art school, I elucidate how a new student tacitly learns to participate in the group dynamics of the art school. Through video analysis, and using a mediated discourse theoretical (Scollon, 1998, 2011) and multimodal (inter)action analytical lens (Norris, 2004, 2011), I illustrate how the learning of tacit practices is accomplished. I show how successful participation for a novice depends on the following three tenets: 1. the ability to gain focused attention (by the novice); 2. the ability to grant the novice access to shared focused attention (by expert participants); and 3. the ability and willingness of expert participants to relinquish their own focused interaction at times in order to allow the novice to learn successful participation. When these three abilities are present, a new student integrates successfully into a new classroom setting, even if the student is mediocre at art. While, if these abilities are missing, a new student will drop out of the class (in this art school), even if they are very good at art.

Keywords: Learning, multimodal (inter)action analysis, participation, practice;

1. Introduction

This article examines a new student’s learning of tacit participation in an adult art class. Drawing on video excerpts from an extensive 4 month ethnographic study of an art school, I elucidate through video stills how a new student tacitly learns to participate in the group dynamics of the art school. Tacit group participation in a learning environment, I argue, is the basis for successful learning of the actual content. I further argue that even content-strong students disengage and leave the art school if they have not learned how to participate in group interaction.

Through video analysis, and using a mediated discourse theoretical (Scollon, 1998, 2001) and multimodal
(inter)action analytical approach (Norris, 2004, 2011), I illustrate how the learning of tacit practices is accomplished and how tacit practices are intertwined with shared focus between teacher and new student as well as with shared focus between students. Taking the mediated action (Scollon, 1998, 2001; Wertsch, 1998) as my unit of analysis, I, for example, show how the new student gains the teacher’s attention; how other students allow this shared focus to happen (even at an inopportune moment); how the new student takes on an onlooker position, thereby gaining understanding of what is going on in the group, but also, and simultaneously, estranging herself from the group.

2. Site of engagement: Adult art lesson

In this article I consider an art class which consists of 5 adult female students. The class runs for 3 hours in the morning once a week. Four of the five students participate in the group lesson, engaging in various practices, while the new student has not yet acquired these practices and is performing the actions for the first time, never really performing them quite like the others. I take practice to mean the most typical way of the word, namely: habit, custom, tradition, way, or routine of doing something, using Scollon’s (1998) definition of practice as an action with a history. The art teacher and the four female students, who regularly attend the classes, have developed their own practices of engaging with each other and with the art that they are producing. The new student, who has joined the group for the first time, of course, cannot know these practices; and the regular attendants, including the art teacher, are not consciously aware of the practices, as they are simply behaving in a manner or way that feels right. This doing what feels right is what I am calling tacit practices. These practices are unspoken and implicitly understood by those who enact them. Much of this doing what feels right is learned just as tacitly by new-comers as it is performed by those who habitually engage in these tacit practices. In fact, I would like to suggest that if such (normally) tacit practices are made explicit (such as a teacher telling a first grader to sit still, look at the board and to listen), these practices are more difficult to pick up and/or are often defied.

2.1. Tacit practices and attention levels

While this is an art lesson, I am here not interested in the art of painting or drawing that students engage in. I am here interested in the ways the students and art teacher interact with one another, while participating in this group-interaction. The students’ positions are illustrated in Figure 1:

![Figure 1: Students’ positions in the art class](image1)

Here, the white lines indicate walls. There is one other student present, but she is working in a different room and only appears at the end of the lesson when she comments on the painting of student 2. The art teacher, Andrea (Figure 2 left), moves around and helps when help is requested. The woman I am mostly interested in here is the woman in Figure 2 on the right, as she is attending the art school for the first time. This woman lives in the same town as all of the other women and participation in the art school differs greatly from other areas of participation in the town. The usual participation in a women’s group is based on spoken language. However, in the art school, talk is quite limited. Each one of the habitually attending art students has acquired the tacit practice of participating in this site of engagement and the new student is fairly quickly integrated. After only a few hours of painting she, on the one hand, is learning how to participate in this mutual (inter)action but, on the other hand, she is not participating quite like the others, yet.
I have much data of new students arriving and spending time at the art school. Very broadly and generally, there are two ways that students interact when first participating: 1. they try to engage others in the common town practice of talking and gossiping; or 2. they try to understand the practices that others engage in at the art school.

This article illustrates the latter, where the new student gradually picks up actions from others. The practices that I am mostly interested in here, are: (1) the students paint quietly; (2) they step back from their own painting, gaze at it and then move forward again to continue painting; (3) they verbally ask the teacher, Andrea, for help; (4) they gaze at each other’s paintings from a distance; and (5) when the art lesson is almost over, students step closer to and comment on other students’ work. Andrea is the only person who can stand and watch in close proximity, and she is the only one who can be approached for help throughout the lesson.

2.1.1. First time student

Figure 3 illustrates how the new student is painting with chalk and charcoal and Andrea is watching from the side in close proximity without saying anything; this is Andrea’s practice as an art teacher. She encourages student-lead working and does not comment or give suggestions unless asked to do so. Then, Andrea is addressed by the student to the right and walks over to look at the painting and to respond to the student’s question. In the meantime, the new student continues to paint quietly as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 3: The new student paints and the art teacher, Andrea, is watching. Figure 4: The student paints quietly and focuses on her own work.

Next, the student who is working behind the new student has stepped back and is gazing at her own painting. She then turns to look at the new student’s painting (Figure 5). While she gazes at the new student’s painting, she does not comment on it. This silent gazing at each other’s work is a common practice that shows engagement and acceptance without evaluation of the art work. While this student seems to have a critical gaze, this actually seems to be her regular facial expression when looking at paintings including her own. Then, the new student is mimicking the practice of stepping back from her painting and gazing at it from a distance (Figure 6). She performs this action for the first time, and it will take many times before the many actions turn into a practice for her. She does it for a second time shortly after the first, which shows us that she is actually performing the action with a different purpose than the one embedded in the regular art-lesson practice. Within the practice, we find that the student is attempting to perfect the painting, while the new student here tries to do something else.

Performing this repeated action and lingering in the watching position is an attempt to gain attention, and as this is not working, she again steps back. This time, however, she stands to the side of her painting and not in front of it. She has now directly stepped in Andrea’s way, thus gaining the art teacher’s attention without having to say anything (Figure 7). Andrea, who was helping the student in purple (by getting cellophane), engages the new student in talk as she is walking around her, stands back and looks at the painting, allowing for verbal engagement (Figure 8). The student in purple is looking on, as she is now waiting for Andrea, and as the new student begins to speak, she also draws the attention of the student behind Andrea, who then also begins to gaze at the new student’s painting. Next, Andrea offers help, giving the new student her full attention, while the other students are no longer paying attention to the new student (Figure 9).
While students engage in gazing at others’ paintings, they never comment during the lesson. Throughout almost three hours, the new student has focused solely on her own work. While she has picked up the practice of moving back and looking at her own painting fairly quickly (and this is something that takes some students much longer to learn), it takes her to the end of the lesson to actually try to begin participation in the group by taking notice of other students’ work (Figure 10).

When the new student is looking at the other student’s work, it is now the end of the lesson; a point at which students engage in the practice of looking and commenting on each other’s work. In order to count as engaging in the practice of gazing and commenting on another student’s work, the new student is standing too far away from the painting of the other student. Thus, while she is trying to engage, she has not yet learned the correct distance that is taken up to students’ work at the different times during the lesson. Here, she is taking up the distance that students usually take up at an earlier time during the lesson. Thus, rather than engaging in the practice, she takes up the position of an onlooker of the interaction and not a participant in the interaction. Thus, when we take a wider lens and examine the learning of participation in a new group setting, we find that the learner, here the new art student, may focus on the task at hand, her painting, but that she in fact has much else to learn in order to be able to participate successfully. While all actions that the art students perform here, are concrete mediated actions, these concrete mediated actions are performed much more smoothly by the four students and by Andrea who have participated together in the production of successful art classes for a long time. For all of them, the practices of participation that I have focused on here are habituated (actions with a history), allowing for the individual concrete mediated actions effortlessly to unfold. Differently so for the new student who has never before performed these
mediated actions and has not yet learned the tacit practices. While she does work quietly, she does not engage in participation with the other students by gazing at their work from a distance during the lesson. Instead, she is continuously focused upon her own painting. Further, not only does she move back to gaze at her own painting in order to successfully complete it, but rather uses this action to gain Andrea’s attention. When she is able to attract Andrea’s attention, both Andrea and the student that Andrea had been engaged with, shift their attention to the new student’s work. It is this allowing for shared focused attention to happen, even at a moment that has been incorrectly gained, which illustrates that the group is open to new participants; something that the new art student does not recognize explicitly, but something that she feels as being accepted by the group on an emotive bases. At the end of the lesson, when the new student gazes at the work of another student, she does so by standing too far away from the painting and the student, thereby taking up an onlooker-position. While she does not engage in the practice of gazing and commenting on another student’s work at the end of the lesson, she does engage by focusing her attention on the other student’s painting. Further, by paying attention to the interaction that emerges between the students and observing the unfolding interaction, she is learning the tacit practice.

3. Conclusion

Learning a new practice of participation can be a difficult task, and it is usually one that is never focused upon, but it is one that allows for successful participation. There are particular aspects that allow for successful participation: 1. the ability to gain focused attention as a novice; and 2. the allowing of shared focused attention by expert participants, even when the new student incorrectly seeks this attention. However, this also means that 3. expert participants need to be able and willing to relinquish their own focused interaction in order to allow the new student to participate successfully. None of these are logically prior to each other. Rather, all of these have to happen simultaneously and repeatedly to allow a new student entry into the group and give the new student time to learn the tacit practices. We have much work to do to investigate the tacit practices that are involved in successful participation. Quite often, these tacit practices have little to do with the actual focused-upon practices which would in this case be the fact whether an individual learns to paint. At the moment, my research indicates that students who are not given the opportunity of making mistakes in tacit practices without being overtly corrected, do not easily learn successful group participation. Further, in instances when the relative expert participants do not at times relinquish their focused interaction to allow the novice entry into a focused interaction even when it is at an inopportune time (from the expert’s perspective), the novice will have a difficult and possibly impossible task to engage in successful participation. Here, in the art school, students who, for whichever reason, are not able to pick up the tacit practices in a fairly short time, stop taking art lessons even if they are very good at art. Yet, those students who learn successful group participation, even if they do not do very well in art, stay and continue taking lessons. While my study was limited to one art school, and the findings presented here should be tested in other classrooms, it appears that the study of tacit participation in learning settings are a fruitful endeavour if we really want to understand why some students learn well and others do not, why some students stay in school and others do not. Group participation, as illustrated in this article, appears to have a direct impact on content learning, because content learning does not develop successfully without a simultaneously successful development of tacit participation within the classroom.

References