7-1-2000

Guest Editor's Introduction: Teacher Research on Classroom Discourse in Northern Canadian Communities

Judith C. Lapadat
digitalpublishing@library.wisc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://newprairiepress.org/networks

Part of the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Guest Editor's Introduction: Teacher Research on Classroom Discourse in Northern Canadian Communities

by Judith C. Lapadat

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Judith C. Lapadat, Education Program, College of Arts, Social, and Health Sciences, University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, Canada V2N 4Z9.

In 1994, the first new public university in Canada in twenty-five years opened its doors. The mandate of the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) is to serve the northern two-thirds of the province of British Columbia, a vast area stretching across the province from west to east, and from the town of 100 Mile House in the south to the Yukon border. UNBC came into being through grassroots lobbying by northern residents, who have been under-served by universities historically (Interior University Society, 1988; Lapadat & Janzen, 1994; University of Northern British Columbia, 1993). Northern residents argued for the need to provide professional development opportunities regionally, and northern educators were at the forefront of the movement to build a "university of the north" (Education Advisory Committee, 1990; Interior University Society, 1988). Therefore, when UNBC came into being, one of the first steps was to develop graduate Master of Education programs for northern teachers, and to begin the planning process for a preservice teacher education program.

One of UNBC's graduate education streams is an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction, with a focus on Language in Education. From the beginning, this program has been conceptualized as collaborative, constructivist, and transformative. Building on paradigmatic shifts emphasizing the discursive nature of learning and teaching, and the view that knowledge is both socially created and political (hooks, 1994; Lapadat, 2000a; Lemke, 1989; Onore, 1990; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1999; Wells, 1990), this graduate program is designed with the aim of opening dialogue among teachers to reflect on and interrogate practice. A central belief is that teachers are "expert knowers about their own students and classrooms" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16). Study is guided by progressive education values and focuses on "the construction of alternative ways of observing and understanding students' work, solving education problems, and helping teachers uncover and clarify their implicit assumptions about teaching, learning, and schooling" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16).

In acknowledging that teachers are agents in their classrooms and practitioners who reflect on and generate knowledge, we see teacher research as a locus for educational change. Teacher research honours local ways of knowing, provides an inquiry-based alternative to traditional transmissive and technical models of teaching and learning, and challenges the hegemony of universities as the creators, keepers, and dispensers of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Evertson & Murphy, 1992; Lapadat, 1997; Lapadat & Janzen, 1994). I use "teachers" inclusively here, meaning educators who teach across the age ranges from early childhood to adult levels, and in various contexts and capacities.

Therefore, the development of a graduate program at UNBC originates in many of the same goals and theoretical perspectives that are the foundation of the teacher research movement of the last decade. In their recent review, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) talk about the transformative possibilities of the teacher research movement. Primarily it involves seeing and changing, or "re-visioning," knowledge-power relationships by bringing teaching and research together in the classroom. They say that, "In its broadest sense, the emphasis of the movement is on teacher as knower and as agent for change" (p. 22). In reconceptualizing the nature of knowledge, the processes of learning, and their own role, teachers are empowered to contribute to the discourse of knowledge, opening real possibilities for educational change.

Classroom discourse is one important site for reflection and change. As teachers begin to examine previous assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning and how their assumptions are enacted in practice, the day-to-day talk that takes place in classrooms can be made visible and scrutinized. Patterns of talk reflect the theories that teachers hold and provide data for the examination of teaching practices. Patterns of classroom talk also can represent the community of learners and what they bring to the classroom, yet the teacher has inordinate power to set the tone or dominate the discourse (Cazden, 1988). Because asymmetry between teachers and students is reflected in and sustained by discourse patterns, classroom discourse is where teachers can initiate changes in practice with considerable and immediate impact (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996). Thus, much research on classroom discourse is change-oriented, and encompasses or overlaps with research on self-reflection, constructivist practices, teaching effectiveness, literacy instruction, teaching in linguistically or culturally diverse settings, and examinations of teachers as researchers (Delpit, 1990; Gee & Green, 1998; hooks, 1994; Lauritzen & Jaeger, 1997).

The study of classroom discourse, therefore, goes beyond the study of teacher talk, or the recording of students' conversations in groups. As important as such work has been for understanding the role of talk in setting the atmosphere of a classroom and for examining cognitive and social aspects of how students use talk to learn, classroom discourse research fundamentally is concerned with larger issues. These include matters of equity and access, the empowerment of teachers and learners, the critique of curriculum, and strategies for educational and social change (Lapadat, 2000b). Through the types of spoken and written language that are invited or forbidden in classrooms, students may become agents in their learning or they may be excluded or alienated. Their understandings may be nurtured or oppressed. They may see themselves and their history reflected in the curriculum, or they may be disciplined and positioned as "the other" (Howatt, 1997). Traditions of a hierarchical and colonial education system that constrain possibilities for students and teachers alike can be reinforced by or challenged by the discourse embraced within classrooms and educational organizations.

This special issue brings together a series of articles written by practitioners in a number of northern communities in British Columbia, all of whom are affiliated with UNBC's graduate program in Curriculum and Instruction. The region they are writing about is large, rugged, and sparsely populated. Prince George, centrally located and the site of the main UNBC campus, has a population of 75,000. There are seven other small cities in the 10,000-20,000 range, and the remainder of the population resides in small towns and villages. Although Status Indians make up approximately 2.5% of the population of BC (1994 figures: BC Ministry of Health, 1996),

approximately 6.5% school children in the Prince George school district are Aboriginal, by self-report (Mothus, 1997). However, this varies by region and school, and some contributors to this issue have estimated that up to one-third of their school populations are Aboriginal.[1] Some schools have sizable Indo-Canadian and East-Asian populations as well (Mothus, 1997), but the majority of students are of white European background.

The economic base of the region is driven by primary resource extraction, including forestry, mining, fishing, and farming. Although the median family income in selected communities across northern BC is higher than the median for BC as a whole or for Canada (Statistics Canada, 1999), child and family poverty is a serious problem in Prince George (Ternowetsky, 1997a, 1997b), and in other northern communities (Mariash, Edwards, & Stokes, 1997; Edwards, Mariash, & Stokes, 1997). For example, Ternowetsky estimates that 60.1% of lone parent families living in Prince George are poor, and also that 25.5% percent of children in Prince George are poor, as contrasted with 19.5% nationally. These poverty levels impact on health, nutrition, mortality, and school attainment, these researchers report (Edwards, et al., 1997; Ternowetsky, 1997a. 1997b).

Each of the contributors to this issue lives and works within a community in northern BC, and has been engaged in observing, reflecting on, or trying to change, classroom discourse patterns in one of various types of classroom settings. In the first paper, written collaboratively by a university professor and a classroom teacher, Anne Lindsay and Ruth Mason discuss the notion of "reflective practitioner." Their theoretical overview provides an important framework for their own study, as well as for the rest of the papers in this collection. They argue for the importance of teachers examining and reflecting on classroom discourse as an insight into practice and as a stimulus to professional development. Lindsay and Mason's purpose was to work collaboratively with teachers in an early childhood education (ECE) setting to develop with them a process for supporting meaningful reflection, as part of the Daycare Centre's program for professional development. Their study involved audiotaping ECE teachers' daily interactions with children, transcribing them, then conducting sessions of guided reflection with the teachers about how they were using talk.

In the second paper, Karen Scales describes her experience in introducing math journals in her combined grades three and four class. Scales based her intervention on research showing that writing about their mathematical understandings can facilitate students' conceptual development and metacognitive skills in math, as well as fostering a sense of ownership and improved attitudes towards math. She found that, for some children, the utility of journalling to enhance mathematical thinking was limited by their writing levels, whereas other children were more expressive in their journals than in oral interactions. She notes that, as a teacher, she found the journals to be an important diagnostic tool. Finally, the dialogic nature of the journals enabled timely, personalized feedback, and seemed to be a motivating factor for her students.

Next, a teacher-librarian, Anne Lyle, describes how she implemented a literature circle with a combined grades four and five class. Lyle begins by outlining her central premise that encouraging a love of reading ought to be a central aim in schools. Literature circles may promote reading enjoyment and cognitive development by linking positive social interactions with book reading through student-led small-group discussions, she argues. Lyle presents

examples of the students' literature circle discussions that illustrate several benefits of this approach, as per her expectations. Interestingly, however, it is Lyle's description of logistical difficulties in implementing literature circles, along with her observations about the preeminence of group dynamics, that make her article a particularly valuable contribution to research on this topic.

In the next paper, Ward Pycock describes his attempt to disrupt the pervasive Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern in social studies discussions in his grades six and seven class by altering his own contributions to the discourse. Specifically, he substituted revoicing (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996) for the third component of evaluation in the three-part IRE sequence. Pycock reflects on the way in which this opened the discussion to greater student ownership, but with the concomitant risks of controversial topics arising and important topics being glossed over rather than explored in depth.

Al Lehmann then reports on a study he conducted in his grade twelve English class. Like Lyle, Lehmann was interested in exploring ways to encourage and manage class discussion about literature. However, he was working with older students, and those students were all reading the same novel. Lehmann approached his question by first surveying students about their attitudes toward class discussion , then he formed small discussion groups charged with the task of formulating higher order questions about the text to be posed to the class at large. Following the whole-class discussion, he conducted a post-discussion survey of the students' views about the discussion experience. In summarizing the students' responses, Lehmann reminds us of the complexity of perspectives and issues involved, such as the thorny issue of whether and how to evaluate discussion participation, and concludes by endorsing the use of discussion in high school English.

The final paper in this collection was contributed by Nancy Ross, a college instructor of adult basic education. Ross questioned whether teacher-student discourse patterns in her class differed depending on whether the student: engaged in the interaction was First Nations or not. In particular, she analyzed her own contributions to the classroom discourse to determine whether she differentiated between students, or used strategies that created asymmetric opportunities for participation. In this thoughtful critique, Ross considers how cultural differences in discourse expectations and beliefs have consequences for students' classroom experiences. In particular, she shows how teachers may position students through their turn-taking choices, or differentially foreclose participation depending on how they direct questions, scaffold responses, or set the pace. Each of the papers in this collection examines a different aspect of classroom discourse, in settings ranging from early childhood classrooms to the college setting. Yet all of the papers are similar in that they portray issues and problem-solving approaches that arise from practice and are central to practitioners' concerns, and also in that they portray communities far from the large urban centres where most North American educational research has been conducted. Each contributor to this series reflects on practice with the aim of improving practice, and thus each is a contributor to wider educational change.

References

1. BC Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors (1996, March). Analysis of Status Indians in British Columbia: Updated Report, 1987-1994 (number 0226-94). Ministry of Health: Vital Statistics.
2. Cazden, C. (1988). Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning. Portsmouth, NJ: Heinemann.
3. Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. B. (1999). The teacher research movement: A decade later. Educational Researcher, 28 (7), 15-25.
4. Delpit, L. (1990). Language diversity and learning. In S. Hynds & D. L. Rubin (Eds.), Perspectives on talk and learning (pp. 247-266). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
5. Education Advisory Committee (1990, December). Report of the Education Advisory Committee (Prepared for the Interim Governing Council of the University of Northern British Columbia). Prince George: University Archives, University of Northern British Columbia.
6. Edwards, C., Mariash, J., & Stokes, J. (1997, April). Poverty and nutrition in Quesnel. CWRC Newsletter, 2 (1), 9-10. (Available from the Child Welfare Research Centre, University of Northern British Columbia).
7. Evertson, C. M., & Murphy, J. (1992). Beginning with the classroom: Implications for redesigning schools. In H. H. Marshall (Ed.), Redefining student learning: Roots of educational change (pp. 293-320). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
8. Gee, J. P., & Green, J. L. (1998). Discourse analysis, learning, and social practice: A methodological study. Review of Research in Education, 23, 119-169.
9. hooks, b. (1994). Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom. New York: Routledge.
10. Howatt, I. (1997). Education for assimilation: Language, literature, and acculturation in senior English. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia.
11. Interior University Society (1988, October). Brief to the Cabinet Committee on Regional Development. Prince George: University Archives, University of Northern British Columbia.
12. Lapadat, J. C. (1997). Students' construction of scientific knowledge: Cultural context, mutual focus, and conversation. In S. McLarnon & D. Nord (Eds.), Northern Parallels: 4th Circumpolar Universities Cooperation Conference proceedings (pp. 278-294). Prince George, BC: UNBC Press.
13. Lapadat, J. C. (2000a). Evaluative discourse and achievement motivation: Students' perceptions and theories. Language and Education, 14, 37-61.
14. Lapadat, J. C. (2000b, April). An Online Discussion About the Politics of Classroom Discourse: Student Identity, Administrative Aims, and School Change. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
15. Lapadat, J. C., & Janzen, H. (1994). Collaborative research in northern communities: Possibilities and pitfalls. BC Studies, 104, 69-83.
16. Lauritzen, C., & Jaeger, M. (1997). Integrating learning through story: The narrative curriculum. Albany, NY: Delmar.
17. Lemke, J. L. (1989). Social semiotics: A new model for literacy education. In D. Bloome (Ed.), Classrooms and literacy (pp. 289-309). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

18. Mariash, J., Edwards, C., & Stokes, J. (1997, Fall). Poverty and housing in Quesnel. CWRC Newsletter, 2 (2), 3-4. (Available from the Child Welfare Research Centre, University of Northern British Columbia).

19. Mothus, T. G. (1997). The effects of strategy instruction on the reading comprehension achievement of junior secondary school students. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada.

20. O'Connor, M., & Michaels, S. (1996). Shifting participant frameworks: Orchestrating thinking practices in group discussions. In D. Hicks (Ed.), Discourse, learning, and schooling (pp. 63-103). New York: Cambridge University Press.

21. Onore, C. (1990). Negotiation, language, and inquiry: Building knowledge collaboratively in the classroom. In S. Hynds & D. L. Rubin (Eds.), Perspectives on talk and learning (pp. 57-72). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

22. Pappas, C. C., Kiefer, B. Z., & Levstik, L. S. (1999). An integrated language perspective in the elementary school: A action approach (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.

23. Statistics Canada (1999, August). 1997 Families Tables 5 and 7 For Selected BC Communities (number 13C0016). Statistics Canada: Small Area and Administrative Data Division.

24. Ternowetsky, G. (1997a, April). Child and family poverty in Prince George: A preliminary report card. CWRC Newsletter, 2 (1), 11-13. (Available from the Child Welfare Research Centre, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, BC).

25. Ternowetsky, G. (1997b, Fall). Child poverty and the National Child Benefit: Disentitlement for the poorest of poor children. CWRC Newsletter, 2 (2), 10-13. (Available from the Child Welfare Research Centre, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, BC).

26. University of Northern British Columbia (1993, October). History of UNBC: 1987-1993. Prince George, BC: UNBC Office of Communications.

27. Wells, G. (1990). Talk about text: Where literacy is learned and taught. Curriculum Inquiry, 20, 369-403.

Footnotes

[1] Demographic estimates of school populations are hard to obtain, as these data have not been collected routinely by school districts, and also because of the different ways ethnic origin can be defined. In these papers, the terms "Aboriginal" and "First Nations" are used interchangeably to refer to the original inhabitants of North America.