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“You’re not the only one going through all them crazy changes”: Tracing Group Learning in Conversations

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Abstract. Conversation analysis is proposed as a means to uncover how group learning evolves via power negotiation among members. A case of oppositional learning within a prison is presented as an example.

The stories we tell are the way we know the world (Bruner, 1996). Narratives make human action and interaction coherent not only to the storyteller, but also to those to whom the story is told. To these ends, a narrative reflects both the individual’s sense of particular phenomena around which a story is constructed and the cultural templates or plots available for constructing it (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). By taking the *how* of storytelling as the object of our analysis, we can envision how an individual is both affected by and affects the ongoing construction of a shared way of knowing.

When a story is offered in the context of a conversation, it must be allowed by the conversational order to emerge (Psathas, 1995). In a group setting, stories often will contain components that link them to ongoing interaction. For instance, the preface to a story often includes some reason why it is connected logically to the rest of the conversation, as well as why it will be of interest to others. The utterances that link stories to an ongoing conversation are interesting because they indicate the ways in which storytellers are attentive to their engagement in an interaction with other people.

Conversation analysis is a research method for studying how people engage in conversation or “talk-in-interaction” with other people (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998, p. 14). It is not merely a means to observe how people communicate information back and forth, but rather to see how people collaborate to construct mutual understanding. Conversation analysts closely examine talk-in-interaction with two fundamental assumptions in mind: (1) talk-in-interaction is deeply structured, and (2) people use these deep structures to accomplish something – to construct knowledge and ways of knowing – in everyday conversations. This paper describes why conversation analysis is useful for the study of group learning, and draws on a particular case to illustrate.

What is Group Learning?

Group learning has been defined most often in terms of three components: (1) what the group knows, (2) the group’s ways of knowing, and (3) the group’s processes by which it goes about creating knowledge (the group learning process). For instance, new social movement theorists envision collective identity (what the group knows) as a process by which members interactively construct mutually understood meanings regarding the processes and goals of the group as a whole (Melucci, 1996). The experience of unity or “groupness” (Cohen, 1985, p. 684) arises from group action; it is “a result rather than a point of departure” (Melucci, 1985, p. 793). In the literature on organizational learning, both the process and product of learning are discussed, and learning is closely associated with action (see, e.g., Watkins, 1996; Argyris, 1996). In other words, a group does not become a collective learner until its members act

together. As the group carries out a group learning process, it creates and recreates its knowledge and theories of knowing, as illustrated in Figure 1.

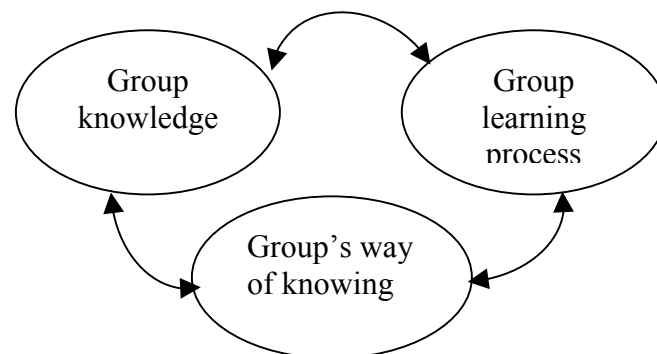


Figure 1. The mutuality of group knowledge, learning process, and epistemology.

It is useful to understand groups as learners, particularly when they are not functioning as we would like them to (Argyris, 1996) or when we have democratic goals in mind (Kilgore, 1999). With a sociological imagination, we can uncover an underlying logic of group learning, the most important knowledge the group has. Furthermore, by placing a focus on power relations, we are able to explain how a particular logic of group learning is reinforced and reproduced. Powerful members of the group are in the best position to intervene in the group learning process, but are the least likely to be motivated to do so, since their power is understood to lie in the maintenance of existing conditions.

If conducted from a critical perspective, inquiry can reveal how members become habituated to the group's logic of learning, unaware that there was a particular logic of learning to begin with, or that it might serve some members at the expense of others. For instance, people in an organization may follow certain procedures because, "that's the way we've always done it," even if those procedures do not make sense in their day to day work lives, even if those procedures oppress them.

Yet, despite our awakening to the logic underlying oppressive group learning processes, we have difficulty moving forward with this critical knowledge. As Mezirow (2001) has admitted repeatedly, individual transformation, including the awareness of the arbitrariness of one's own oppression, does not necessarily lead to collective transformation. The critical view of power as a repressive force possessed by some and exerted on others, is useful in uncovering taken-for-granted understandings that are perpetuated to maintain the comfortable conditions of the status quo for the powerful in a group. However, it fails to account for the fact that often we submit to oppression, even though we are aware that we are being oppressed.

Postmodernists say that people submit to oppression because we have varying interests and devotions over which we choose to or not to resist the power immanent in every social interaction. Group knowledge is no longer part of a grand narrative about the oppression of people (Nicholson and Fraser, 1999); rather, it has its own local historical and cultural foundation. This group knowledge has developed, not at the sole discretion of those who benefit most from it, but rather as a result of the various social interactions among group members. Foucault calls this disciplinary knowledge, which "increases the power of individuals at the same time as it renders them more docile" (Sawicki, 1991, p. 22). In a college classroom, for example,

students become empowered in a discipline by learning a disciplinary way of knowing, to the extent that they submit to learning it in the way it is presented to be learned.

Thus, it is in the details of our social interactions – in our local expressions of and resistance to power – that we shall find the logic behind the logic, the negotiation of power in a particular group, and then we can answer the question, “What is the process we are going to use to learn?”

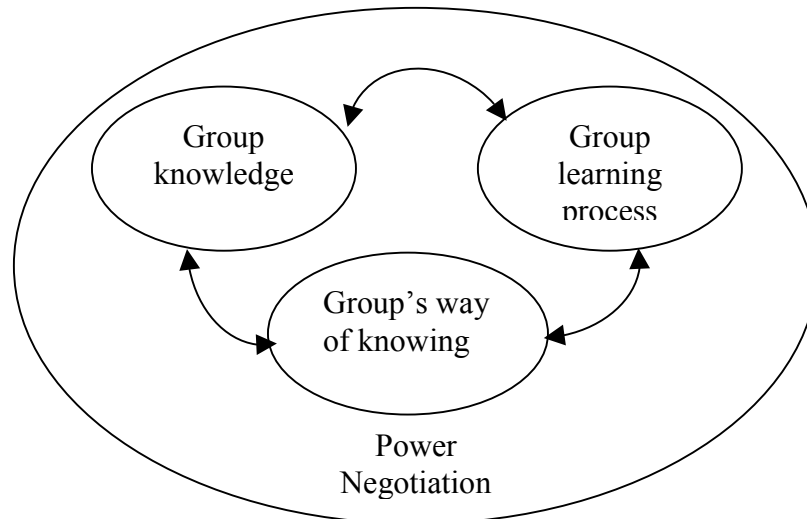


Figure 2. The Negotiation Of Group Learning.

Conversation Analysis as Postmodern Methodology

Feminists and other critical theorists have expressed concern that postmodernism comes at a time just when oppressed groups have begun to have a voice. Under this “specter of relativism” (Nicholson, 1999, p. 123), we must acknowledge that there are no universal principles upon which to claim moral superiority. But as Nicholson points out, this is not the same as endorsing cultural relativism (p. 124), but rather an acceptance that there is no salvation to be had outside of our local contexts. Because “salvation does not coexist well with diversity” (p. 128), Nicholson says we must “rely on whatever shared commitments contingently exist” (p. 128) to negotiate what the group knows.

This rejection of universal principles does not drive us all the way back to where we started, lost in the trees of symbolic interaction and unaware of domination. Instead, the very fact that we submit to domination even when no one is forcing us to, reminds us that we do not have to. By understanding how the process of learning is negotiated in a particular context, we can uncover the conflict and intervene.

One means by which we can observe how a logic of group learning is negotiated locally is conversation analysis. The criticisms of conversation analysis as a research method are much like the criticisms of postmodernism as a social philosophy. For instance, conversation analysis is accused of ignoring social forces that shape and constrain behavior, and therefore is deemed unsuitable for critical inquiry. But as Kitzinger (2000) argues,

[Conversation analysis] does not commit us to an ‘uncritical’ view of the social world, but it does commit us to a broadly ethnomethodological one in which people are understood not simply as victims of an all-powerful social order but

also as agents actively engaged in methodological and sanctioned procedures for producing or resisting, colluding with or transgressing, the taken-for-granted social world. (p. 168)

By analyzing detailed talk-in-interaction, we can see how participants “do power and powerlessness, oppression and resistance” (p. 174).

Tracing Group Learning in Conversations

To illustrate, I offer the case of an educational program for incarcerated women in a state penitentiary (Kilgore, 1999). I studied the yearlong prison program as a participant observer, developing curricula and taping and writing notes about each weekly two-hour session. In particular, I searched for evidence of group learning; that is, the process by which collective identity emerged over time to include a shared understanding of the group’s purpose; norms of behavior; and modes of collective learning.

In the beginning, participants exhibited very little interest in the educational program. The group did not interact, but rather individuals answered researchers’ questions and then turned their attention away until again prompted to speak. In these early weeks, several women told their stories according to master scripts; that is, dominant cultural templates by which sense is made of experience (Kilgore, 2001; Bloom, 1998). For example, women often structured their understandings of their response to a series of events with a redemption script that was prevalent in the prison, like “I used to take things for granted,” or “As long as you keep the faith.” Another dominant template was one of passivity and powerlessness, in which a woman would solve a problem by “giving it to God.” Narratives about the women’s lives were offered as testimonies to the transformational power of doing time, or participating in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or any of the Christian programs offered in the prison. Almost everyone offered such a narrative to the group, in which she had been lost, but had given her problems to God and was now found, and almost everyone appeared not to listen to anyone else’s testimony.

It had served the women to construct such narratives for the various group settings offered by the prison. For one thing, these programs offered a break from the lonely tedium of a typical prison day. For another, every inmate knows that if she does not participate in AA and other prison programs, it will be counted against her when she goes up for parole. Going before the parole board is the most significant event in an inmate’s prison life, and requires a woman to tell a compelling story of redemption. Women spend years, and several visits to the parole board, practicing and refining such stories.

It was not until the sixth week that any participant indicated a definitive interest in other members of the group, when one member noticed another was missing and asked where she was. Over time, participants began to exhibit more connection to the content of others’ utterances. One way that the researchers encouraged this was by spending more time at the beginning of class asking each woman to bring the group up to date on her own life since the previous meeting. For several weeks, this activity mainly took the form of turn taking without significant interaction, but participants became increasingly cognizant of and responsive to the subjects upon which other women were speaking. This was vastly different from the disconnected testimonials I had heard in the first sessions, yet still I identified few links in the conversation that indicated a more complex connection to previous stories other than topicality.

In the next several months, I observed more interactive conversation that included reasons why stories connected to the ongoing conversation and why they would be interesting and useful for other participants. Conversation as a means of solving problems began to emerge. One participant would tell a story about a problem she was having outside the group, and other participants would respond with suggestions for how she might have approached the problem differently and what she might do next, often telling their own stories about how they solved analogous problems. The conversation-stopping passive redemption scripts had nearly disappeared in favor of a variety of more active strategies.

At times, there was a general mood in the classroom that seemed to spread to all participants. For instance, one week was particularly low. We asked everyone to share one positive thing that had happened during the week since we had last met, but most offered negative stories and emotions. We concluded as a group that there would be times when the general mood of the prison population would infuse the group. This was also the first indication that a high level of emotional engagement in the group learning activities could not be sustained consistently. It took a great deal of energy for participants to engage in the kinds of activities and sustained interactions that we demanded of them, perhaps because they were so unaccustomed to practicing in this way. We believed that there would have to be “down” weeks where the women could relax and gather their energies for future session.

In addition to the changing structure of the conversation, an expectation that members should take turns helping one another and sharing their own problems emerged. This norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) became more substantive over time, as individuals sometimes took the silences of others as cues to be silent, too. “When [someone else] didn’t share, I didn’t want to share nothing...” And, although we never explicitly established a confidentiality rule in the group, it emerged tacitly over time. Members’ enthusiasm for the conversation grew as this rule became more fully integrated in the collective identity of the group.

About nine months into the program, I believed that the group had developed a stable collective identity unique from dominant prison discourse, one that was reinforced by the group’s continuing conversations and other actions. I had been able to trace the process of group learning by observing how the nature of conversation had evolved. As illustrated in Figure 3, the character of talk-in-interaction evolved over time from a testimonial style of extreme turn-taking with little connection among participants, to an inventory style with talk that was on topic yet involved little helping behavior among participants, to a productive style of problem-solving conversation in which participants asked questions of one another, offered advice, and empathized. Over the course of this collective transformation, the cumulative weight of prison life seemed to lighten while we were in our classroom. Admittedly, it was difficult to sustain a resistant subculture within a near-total institution, and we had to allow for frequent breaks from difficult problem solving.



Figure 3. Tracing group learning in conversations

A Postmodern Understanding of Group Learning

The prison offered a logic of learning that was individualistic. Any learning in groups was oriented around a testimonial style of sharing, in which each person developed and practiced a story of redemption and passivity that changed over time only to the extent that it might sound more attractive at a parole hearing. In contrast, the educational program offered by the researchers evolved toward a productive style of problem solving talk-in-interaction. In particular, our logic of group learning involved active strategies by which individual members were able to engage in and make sense of their own lives.

Through conversation analysis, we were able to trace the development of an oppositional form of group learning. Were we to take an even closer look at the conversation within the classroom, we would see how this logic of learning was negotiated among participants. It is no coincidence that the logic of learning after several months resembled Freire's conscientização, given the researchers' interests. At the same time, some qualities of the group did not reflect the researchers' conscious efforts. For instance, we had established no ground rules about confidentiality, nor did we expect a norm of reciprocity to emerge. These were outcomes of power negotiations among group members. Furthermore, we did not anticipate that a group with an oppositional logic of learning would have to cycle between more and less productive sessions. This finding may resonate with others engaged in oppositional learning – even in the relatively benign constructivist classroom within a traditional university – whose learners' enthusiasm for an alternative logic of learning waxes and wanes within the confines of the near-total institution.

Democracy in education can be no less a story of salvation than those presented before a parole board, and may have no greater meaning to learners. Why does it behoove learners to submit to universal principles of democracy, in the same way inmates submit to redemption scripts? By viewing learners as active negotiators of power, rather than as powerless recipients of whatever even well-intentioned educators bring them, we can better trace the evolution of a logic of group learning. Furthermore, we can go forward with the knowledge that a logic of group learning can change in response to the changing interests of group members.

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