Discourse of Opportunity

How Talk in Learning Situations Creates and Constrains Interactional Ethnographic Studies in Teaching and Learning

Discourse and Social Processes
Lesley A. Rex, series editor
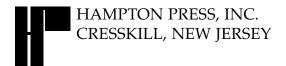
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How Talk in Learning Situations Creates and Constrains Interactional Ethnographic Studies in Teaching and Learning

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Printed in the United States of America

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Foreword

At first blush, it may be difficult to apprehend what unites the study of children at play in a Headstart class, first-year medical students dissecting a cadaver, a struggling reader across the school day, a tutor and child in an after-school biliteracy program, an experienced teacher enculturating a new class of students into ways of behaving that are morally acceptable, a group of college students exploring their development as teachers, the interactions between high school students and their teachers in chemistry classes, a teacher's efforts to disrupt the traditional, gendered, ways in which young males participate in an English class, and meetings among educators working to improve their teaching of mathematics. What unites these topics, in addition to their constituting the foci of this important volume, is that they are all investigations of arguably the most complex of human activities—education—as it occurs in an array of complex social contexts.

In this preface, I wish to speak to several remarkable features of this volume, beginning with its contribution to methodology in educational research. Self-conscious regard for methodology serves to stimulate a field, to bring about new conceptions of what can be known and how it can be known. The recent publication of *Scientific Research in Education* (National Research Council, 2002) and the debate it sparked in journals (e.g., Educational Researcher, 2002) and public forums (e.g. at the annual meeting of the *American Educational Research Association*), testify to the fact that the development of methodology for the human sciences, perhaps particularly in education, is still very much a work in progress.

Polkinghorne (1983) has argued that methodological questions are best answered in the practice of research. This book exemplifies that process. The nine research projects reported in this volume were guided by the tenets of Interactional Ethnography. Collectively, these studies constitute a rare—but highly desirable—test of a method. Each reveals the assumptions, as well as the complement of tools (e.g., discourse analysis) and constructs (e.g., intertextuality and intercontextuality) that are characteristic of this method.

Furthermore, given the array of purposes and contexts in which this method was employed, the studies speak to the capacious nature of Interactional Ethnography and its close relatives. In this volume we encounter a range of questions, multiple sources and forms of data, and a number of theories, including: critical literacy theory, cognitive theory, and sociocultural theory. The congeniality of Interactional Ethnography is a welcomed feature in the complex field of educational inquiry.

A third remarkable characteristic of this volume is that it features initial forays, by novice researchers, into the practices of adopting and adapting Interactional Ethnography. In contrast to experts, for whom a number of practices are second-nature, these novices are explicit about the problems they confronted and the choices they made. For example, we are privy to their decisions regarding: the problem space, the grain size for analyses, coding, the issue of what should constitute the foreground, and the conduct of ethical inquiry.

Finally, this volume is remarkable because of the project it represents. As a doctoral student, the editor, Professor Lesley Rex, was a participant in a community of practice known as the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group. In turn, she has propagated yet another community of practice with her own graduate students. In doing so, she has provided an extraordinary opportunity for these students to both learn about and advance educational inquiry. This volume is testimony to the value of this innovative model of graduate education.

Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar
June 12, 2004

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