

Methodological Orientations for Reading a Narrative of Collaboration Online in Canadian Education

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This study considers three methodological orientations for reading the narrative of collaboration taken root in contemporary discussions around publicly funded education in Canada. It looks through and beyond conflict theory and an archaeological historical approach and turns to a discursive method well suited to close analysis of recorded, text-based exchanges. Selecting discursive psychology and conversation analysis as preferred interpretive tools, it samples an exchange from an institutional interaction between a researcher, a teacher, and two parents in an online discussion forum. The analysis highlights the multiplicity of agendas and work generated across stakeholders by what is ostensibly one shared goal.

Cette étude examine trois orientations méthodologiques pour interpréter le récit sur la collaboration qui s'est enraciné dans les discussions contemporaines portant sur l'éducation publique au Canada. L'étude part de la théorie des conflits et regarde au-delà de celle-ci, passe par une approche historique archéologique pour se tourner vers une méthode discursive bien adaptée à une analyse approfondie des échanges textes enregistrées. Ayant privilégié la psychologie discursive et l'analyse des conversations comme outils d'interprétation, l'étude se penche sur un échantillon consistant en une interaction institutionnelle entre un chercheur, un enseignant et deux parents sur un forum de discussion en ligne. L'analyse fait ressortir la multiplicité de programmes et le travail généré par les parties prenantes vers ce qui est présenté comme étant un objectif partagé.

The primary purpose of this study is to demonstrate the utility of discursive psychology and conversation analysis as interpretive tools in the analysis of recorded, text-based exchanges. In making this case, it offers a sociological rejoinder to conflict theory and an archaeological historical approach. Having thus situated discursive psychology and conversation analysis as a preferred methodology, the study offers a test run of the approach by examining an online conversation among a researcher, a teacher, and two parents. The online conversation is the most recent phase of what was, until recently, an entirely face-to-face, in-person outreach to open dialogue between minority families and their children's schools around key issues like online bullying, mental health and well-being, and, in this study, literacy (Ippolito 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2018a, 2018b). As the analysis in this study demonstrates, an approach informed by discursive psychology and conversation analysis is especially adept at highlighting the multiplicity of agendas across stakeholders as they negotiate what is ostensibly one shared goal.

Fundamentally, the study is inspired by the desire to understand the world from the

perspective of those individuals who live and interact within a specific moment of history and culture and society. In this sense, the study is guided by an ethnomethodological sentiment more than a prescribed process since, as Heritage (1984, p. 5) points out in reference to ethnomethodology, “in its open-ended reference to any kind of sense-making procedure, the term represents a signpost to a domain of uncharted dimensions rather than a staking out of a clearly delineated territory.” Referenced thus, I turn my attention to the sense-making procedure of adult stakeholders in a publicly funded Canadian elementary school. I begin by elaborating the contours of a specific moment of history and culture and society.

The Narrative of Collaboration

A narrative has taken root in contemporary discussions around publicly funded education in Canada. It suggests that governments, school boards, schools, and parents are joint collaborators in the shared goal of academic success and healthy development for children and adolescents. The narrative reiterates itself in government curriculum documents and school board mission statements. Websites are replete with phrases like “it takes a village to raise a child” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016); “we demand an environment in which all students, staff, parents and our community feel valued and have a sense of belonging” (York Region District School Board, 2016); and “we welcome and value parent and community involvement. We listen and respond to needs, so that everyone is included, recognized and valued” (Peel District School Board, 2017). One can immediately understand the potential value of this embedded narrative: it holds the promise of a responsive education system where multiple stakeholders have formal roles in supporting the success and development of children, and it is correlated with a significant impact. As an academic conducting school-based research around the role of minority parents in their children’s schools over these last fifteen years, I have witnessed nothing less than a sea-change in the expectations schools have of parents and parents have of schools (see Ippolito 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2018a, 2018b; Ippolito & Schecter, 2012). The presumption now is that parents will take an active role in their children’s formal learning and schools will create a space for parents to fill this role. As for the scholarly literature, it, too, has experienced its own expansion of study and thought at this reconfigured interface of families and schools.

From a historical perspective, the emergence of this narrative should come as no surprise. Canada’s recent policy history set the stage for it when, in 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy. Then Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau spoke to the policy thus in the House of Commons on October 8, 1971:

A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians. Such a policy should help to break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. National unity if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions. A vigorous policy of multiculturalism will help create this initial confidence. It can form the base of a society which is based on fair play for all. (Library and Archives Canada, n.d., 8545)

Indeed, the decades that followed saw the emergence of programming meant to accommodate cultural and linguistic minorities. Students were provided with programs such as English as a Second Language and Heritage Language, and teachers were supported through professional

development and teacher education geared toward greater sensitivity to minority students (Rezai-Rashti, 1995). At the risk of painting an overly optimistic portrait of recent Canadian history, it is also worth noting the policy of multiculturalism has come under sustained criticism, in the first instance for separating cultural concerns from broader socio-political concerns, that is, for attributing tensions between dominant and minority cultures to ignorance or lack of individual understanding and empathy rather than as a function of systemic power differentials between dominant and minority groups (Olneck, 1990), but also more recently for the fact multicultural policies co-exist with violence against identifiable groups, for instance, the degrading of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Burman, 2016), the barriers to settlement experienced by immigrant women in Canada (Zhu, 2016), and racism against Black Canadians (Douglas, 2012).

Multiculturalism, itself a troubled narrative indicating a reconfigured interface of state and citizenry, laid the groundwork for an altered interface of schools and families.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the narrative of collaboration, like the narrative of multiculturalism, can also ring hollow against educational realities. Once again, in my experience as a school-based researcher, not to mention my experiences as a parent of school-aged children, the processes and practices of formal education systems can oftentimes seem not collaborative, not responsive and not democratic. In the case of linguistic, cultural, and racial minority parents in particular, public discourse around minority parents and their children's education that is welcoming and inclusive can often coexist with a school-based reality where minority parents face multiple barriers to supporting their children. For example, in previous studies (Ippolito 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2018a, 2018b; Ippolito & Schecter, 2012), weak or non-existent lines of communication between minority families and schools emerge as a norm rather than as an exception. In a context where linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity further complicate relationships between families and schools, the challenges are acute—since further Canadian evidence suggests minority populations can be at pronounced risk of underachieving and dropping out of school (McKell, 2010; Sayani, 2010; Smith, Schneider, & Ruck, 2005). On a broader social scale, it may be the case that “the bringing of previously marginalized groups into the societal mainstream is, at best, greeted more ambivalently” (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 190). How, then, can we understand a narrative of collaboration that is welcoming and inclusive in its promise yet fraught with obstacles in delivering a responsive and democratic system of education?

Programmatic Context: Going Online With Minority Families and Their Children's Schools

The ongoing research project at the center of this study is a sustained multi-year effort to forge new kinds of interactional patterns between minority families and their children's schools. Situated in multiple schools in the Greater Toronto Area, the demographic is decidedly diverse, with the large majority of families speaking a home language other than English. The linguistic profiles of the schools indicate either one single large minority group (at one school approximately 80% of families speak Tamil as a first language at home) or smaller percentages of multiple minority groups (several of the schools include speakers of Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, Farsi, Chinese, Vietnamese, Somali, Tamil, Spanish, and Caribbean varieties of English). Working from within this range of experiences, the project has introduced alternate cultural practices for mediating relationships between the families and their children's schools. These practices have included afterschool discussion forums (Ippolito, 2010a), parent driven research (Ippolito, 2010b), and parent and teacher research groups (Ippolito, 2018b). This ongoing research is part

of an extended and evolving literature around parent engagement (Mapp, 2013), specifically as it concerns families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and their children's schools. For decades, research in this area advanced the view that linguistically, culturally, and racially marginalized families should be encouraged and given the resources to align themselves more fully with their children's formal development (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 2001; Rosado, 1994). However, the expectation for change then shifted from families to schools, suggesting schools should not exert normative pressures on marginalized families but evolve to meet their specific social realities (Crozier, 2001; Johnson, Jiang, & Yoon, 2000; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). In the contemporary context, particular attention is focused on the mediating role of social markers such as gender, race, socioeconomics, and, notably, languages (Conus & Fahrni, 2019; Markose & Simpson, 2016; Slavkov, 2017).

Notwithstanding well-justified frustration at the slow pace with which educational practices have responded to the call for meaningful parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Pushor & Amendt, 2018), the multi-year effort at the base of this current study has enjoyed some success in demonstrating that a narrative of collaboration can indeed sustain an active role for minority parents in their children's formal learning.

The most recent phase of this project involves an online discussion forum for parents, educators, and researchers. A review of the literature in this area suggests the online option is primarily used as a data collection tool (Guo, 2015; West, 2016) or as a platform for professional development (Nathans & Revelle, 2013). In this project, the online option was offered to participants as a supplement to existing face-to-face interactions and, in this sense, serves as both a data collection instrument and as an engagement tool. This current study samples the emerging online activity specifically to gauge the potential for discursive psychology and conversation analysis to identify key features defining interactions between these adult stakeholders. Although the brief exchange sampled here is exclusively in English (since participants declined the option of contributing in other languages) subsequent phases of the project would do well to solicit a multilingual data set by creating added incentives for participants to use both English and their minority languages. In this way, analysis would involve the added discursive dimensions of participants speaking across languages and highlight the complex deployment of social identities in multilingual contexts (Block, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

Three Conceptual Orientations

The following section follows a methodological arc in search of a discursive method well suited to close analysis of recorded, text-based exchanges. In this, it moves through and beyond conflict theory and an archaeological historical approach and takes discursive psychology and conversation analysis as its primary reference points in identifying key features defining interactions between participants. My aim here is to weigh the relative merits of these three theoretically-informed orientations in the analysis of my sample data set. Although I am not suggesting these orientations are mutually exclusive, I do put them into starker relief by assessing them on their individual (rather than shared) attributes. As will become evident, a discursive psychological and conversation analytic approach brings the school-community collaboration at the center of this project into focus as emergent micro-social relationships—not as the function of pre-existing, structured socioeconomic hierarchies, as with conflict theory, nor as a set of socio-historically defined practices and relations, as with an archaeological historical approach.

Conflict Approach

The first orientation follows conflict theory in suggesting that education reproduces existing social inequalities through a hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum streams students differentially through a socioeconomic hierarchy to fill specific roles in society. One should expect systems of education to be authoritarian rather than collaborative, static rather than responsive, and hierarchical rather than democratic. By extension, one should also expect the online exchange to be shaped by these broader, macro-level social inequalities; in fact, the analysis of the exchange should confirm that what the participants in the exchange say to each other and how they say it is in large part determined by a pre-existing social structure. The implication here is that for relations between schools and families to be truly collaborative, responsive and democratic, change needs to take place at the level of the social relations of production in the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) or at the level of school and teaching practices (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Freire, 1985; See also Rezai-Rashti, 1995 for an overview of the distinction between these two views within conflict theory.) One of the important contributions of this approach is to provide a broad macro-sociological rationale for understanding how structural realities can diffuse, indeed prevent, a narrative of collaboration from translating rhetoric into tangible, material results.

These well-established lines of argumentation have provided important insights into the structural realities and social impacts of schooling. Analyzing the online exchange through this lens would undoubtedly highlight social inequalities and power relations shaping the nature of the exchange, that is, what the participants in the exchange say; how they say it; and why. However, the effort in this current discussion is not to retrace these well-worn steps but rather to elaborate the conceptual breadth of the discussion around schools and families. My motive here is to complement a macro-level, structural analysis through a micro-sociological rejoinder. I move in this direction by reviewing a second methodological orientation, the archaeological historical approach.

Archaeological Historical Approach

This perspective, informed by the work of the philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault (1970, 1972), is useful in identifying ways of doing and thinking that reside in socio-historically defined discourses. These discourses, understood as practices and relations, are intelligible within specified contexts. In this sense, one way to read the online exchange would be as a 21st century narrative of educational collaboration in Anglo-American settings in urban areas. (This characterization is meant to be specific rather than comprehensive. The discourse of collaboration in education might very well manifest itself in a different way in a different setting. (See Ippolito [2018b] for an elaboration of varied discourse frames—community-based, school-based, and academic-based—in the province of Ontario.) The archaeological historical approach is further defined by the fact that the relations between these participants “cannot be ‘predicted’ by a general theory” (McHoul & Grace, 1993, p. 40). This being the case, one might study the uneasy reality of a narrative of collaboration without having the weight of a general theory occluding the nuances of the particular online exchange. This approach thus enacts the beginnings of a move from the macro-level structural concerns of conflict theory toward the particularities of an identifiable moment in history.

However, following this approach, what the participants do with each other in the online exchange would be interpreted from within a “methodology in which humans are removed from

the center of analysis” (Wallace, 2013, para. 2). For this reason, the approach becomes less appropriate as the research lens becomes more acutely focused on the specifics of interaction in that “the relation of Foucault’s notion of discourse to any particular instance of talk or writing is not always well specified” (Potter, 1996, p. 87). This should come as no surprise since, strictly speaking, this is not Foucault’s project: “Foucault’s interest in the interaction setting (in which actors ‘actively construct ... the world’) is secondary to his interest in larger discourses or bodies of knowledge and in the ways subjects are positioned—and position themselves—through these discourses” (Miller, 2008, p. 268). And, so, even though the broader ambiguity in the approach, that is, between socio-historically defined practices and people’s nuanced actions and words may pose no obstacle to Foucault’s broader archaeological project, as Wallace (2013) suggests, it does fall short when considering the narrative of collaboration in action, in this case in an online exchange. This methodological limit is salient to my current search for an interpretive tool better suited to the task. In this, I take Potter’s (1996) observation as suggestive: “what the [Foucault’s] approach is not sensitive to is the way discourses operate in, say, any particular doctor’s surgery: the sort of arena where conversation analysis has found purchase” (p. 87).

Discursive Psychological Approach

On this note, I turn to a third methodological orientation, a well-established microsociological rejoinder rooted in discursive psychology (DP) and conversation analysis (CA). Discourse and conversation analysis offer a novel perspective for the study of online interaction (e.g., Herring, 2010; Hutchby, 2013; Meredith & Stokoe, 2014; Ong, 2011; Stommel & van der Houwen, 2013) and can bring longstanding philosophical debates into new relief. For instance, Arminen, Licoppe, and Spagnoli (2016) call into question the Cartesian, dualist epistemology of inside observer and outside world by responding to what they see as a false distinction in the theorizing of human-computer interaction, namely, the belief that interactions can be divided into those that are mediated and those that are not. The authors lament a proliferation of “unbridled contrasts between mediated and nonmediated interactions” (Arminen et al., 2016, p. 292) and propose that “all perceptions are actions mediated by bodies, other persons, language, time, culture, and history” (Arminen et al., 2016, p. 293). Rejecting an objectivist reality, in this case, the possibility that a subset of human interactions that do not involve computers are nonmediated, the authors insist that all human interactions are mediated.

Giles, Stommel, Paulus, Lester, and Reed (2015) echo this concern by cautioning against research that treats online data as “merely ‘internet-mediated’” (p. 47), that is, a compromised version of unmediated, face-to-face human interaction. Rather than looking upon “forum data as a (poor) substitute for conducting interviews with ‘hard-to-access’ participants” (Giles, Stommel, Paulus, Lester, & Reed, 2015, p. 47), the authors declare an interest “with the dynamics of online communication per se, and our view is that online communities are interesting in and of themselves, not as weak simulacra of offline communities” (Giles et al., 2015, p. 47).

For their part, Lamerichs and te Molder (2003), writing over a decade earlier, previewed the issue by advancing discursive psychology as a replacement to objectivism, specifically as it informs notions of online identities. They advocated for “an approach that views identities as a fluctuating body of interactional resources upon which people draw in order to perform all sorts of social business” (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003, p. 468). Noting that some researchers of computer mediated communication had, by the beginning of the millennium, begun to include “social context factors” (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003, p. 467), they yet critiqued the fact that,

when attention is drawn away “from what people do with their talk when they represent their ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds ... [S]eparated from their practical discursive and rhetorical context, participants’ descriptions are easily imagined as the result of underlying mental entities” (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003, p. 467).

This third methodological orientation, then, enables a novel perspective for the study of online interaction that veers sharply away from the cognitive and directly toward the discursive. In an applied sense, this shift serves the current study well in that the face-to-face project at the center of this study has evolved beyond observational data, interviews, and surveys to include online exchanges, such as the one sampled in this study.

The close focus and primary empirical source for DP and its attendant methodology, CA, is language-in-use. This level of analytic specificity both defines its approach and marks an important epistemological shift with regard to the two orientations outlined above, that is, the conflict approach and the archaeological historical approach. As Hepburn and Wiggins explain,

Discursive psychology also counters the social psychological view of the individual as part of a matrix of abstract social processes, and replaces it with a focus on people’s everyday practices in various institutional settings. This entails an important change in analytic focus; rather than whether, or how accurately, participants’ talk reflects inner and outer events, DP investigates how “psychology” and “reality” are produced, dealt with and made relevant by participants in and through interaction (2005, p. 595).

Once again, the focus here is squarely on people doing things as they interact in and through language in a specific moment of history and culture and society, that is, via situationally-demarcated utterances. It is for this reason that DP is, to varying degrees, inextricably tied to CA. Following in the tradition pioneered by Sacks (1995), the aim of CA is

... to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus being on how *sequences* of actions are generated. To put it another way, the objective of CA is to uncover the often tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competencies underlying the production and interpretation of talk in organised sequences of interaction. (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 12)

Worth noting is the fact CA’s focus on turns at talk and their underlying procedures and competencies is directed at actual conversations, the kinds of linguistic interactions one finds across a range of contexts, from “the casual interactions in which we routinely engage on a daily basis; but also, through studying how people use specialized forms of talk” (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 6). In education, for example, this might include a casual conversation between parents as they walk their children to school; an exchange between a student and the school secretary; or a school principle being interviewed by a local radio station. Within these human interactions, once again, “a very basic idea within CA is that conduct in interaction is orderly at a fine level of detail The orderliness of interaction is a result of participants’ pervasive orientation to norms in both its production and interpretation” (Sidnell, 2016, pp. 255-256). Although the online excerpt to be sampled in this study is drawn from an online source (and I will review below some of the nuances this introduces to CA as a method), the grounding presumption is that the online exchange yet enacts, as Sidnell (2016) expresses it, a collective orientation to norms at a fine level of detail.

A point of methodological contestation. Notwithstanding this widely held

understanding of CA over its nearly fifty-year evolution, there persists a pressing point of debate within the field. This scholarly division is worth considering since, in addition to its relevance for broader epistemological issues, it has a direct impact on how to sample the online exchange. This debate has emerged between CA's initial preference for focussing exclusively on the spoken exchange itself versus an analysis that extends to include the wider context within which the spoken exchange is set, for instance, the time and place and conditions within which interlocutors speak to each other. Wetherell refers to the former, narrower concern as focused on the collection of "small fragments of interactions transcribed in great detail" (2007, p. 672) and the latter approach as including "the cultural resources, struggles, interactions and relations that the person is working with and how these have been mobilised, temporarily stabilised and turned into their own personal order" (Wetherell, 2007, p. 672). How far should the analysis move beyond a circumscribed excerpt of transcript: should it hold itself to a close description of patterns in a specific episode of talk-in-interaction or should it also consider the broader social context within which the transcript is set? Should it look exclusively at how the language in the transcript is being used or should it also study the person(s) that take shape through the use of language in that way in that time and place? For her part, Wetherell's preference is for the latter, broader approach, holding that the former approach "leads to an especially narrow analytic gaze on that data and its context" (2007, p. 672). She presents the issue as the tip of a much larger philosophical iceberg. Indeed, the iceberg has two-parts, one epistemological and the other ontological.

Drawing on the work of discursive psychologist Derek Edwards (1997), she describes the former approach as epistemological constructionism, the view that "the task of the analyst is not to interpret the world but to study how the world has already been interpreted by participants" (Wetherell, p. 2007, p. 670). To reiterate the position, she cites Edwards' collaborator, Jonathan Potter, who states this constructionist position thus:

The argument is that all we have access to is language-in-use. We do not have access to people's mental states, only to how they describe these states moment to moment. A thoroughgoing and consistent constructionism, then, should focus just on these constructions without trying to ground them further. (Wetherell, 2007, p. 671)

The contrasting approach, that is, an analysis that extends to include the wider context within which the spoken exchange is set, Wetherell (2007, p. 672) identifies, once again in reference to Edwards (1997), as ontological constructionism. Here we find "approaches which develop a meta-theory of mind, the psyche and the nature of social relations using constructionist principles to guide their empirical analyses. Such approaches theorise and present arguments about the nature of mind and subjectivity at any given moment" (Wetherell, 2007, p. 672).

The crux of this debate is how far afield to look when sampling a brief exchange between a researcher, a teacher, and two parents taking part in an online discussion forum. Should it be limited to language-in-use, to "the world [as it] has already been interpreted by participants" (Wetherell, 2007, p. 670), or is the task also to "theorise and present arguments about the nature of mind and subjectivity at any given moment" (Wetherell, 2007, p. 672)?

This question signals an important debate, and I cite it here to lend a sense of the nuance and complexity underlining my choice of DP and CA as a preferred methodological orientation. I also take this opportunity to suggest a way forward that is less dichotomous than the question would suggest, that is, not a stark choice between either epistemological constructionism or ontological constructionism but a borrowing from each: from the more narrowly circumscribed approach,

epistemological constructionism, a focus on the specifics and dynamics of the exchange, “... investigating how the participants in an interaction construct their accounts and formulate versions of events, including formulations of their own and others’ psychological states” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 671), and from the broader approach, ontological constructionism, the fashioning of an interpretation “to describe the configurations of identity and subjectivity which result at particular moments and which might be maintained for shorter and longer durations” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 672).

My broader goal is to achieve both depth and breadth of interpretation. This middle ground is akin to Potter’s position:

I am taking a focus on discourse to mean that the concern is with *talk and text as parts of social practices*. This is somewhat broader than the conversation analytic concerns with talk-in-interaction, but rather more focused on the specifics of people’s practices than the Foucauldian notion of a discourse as a set of statements that formulate objects and subjects. (1996, p. 105)

The application of CA to online data. The use of CA with online data is recent, inchoate, and limited in its scope. Giles (2016) suggests that the use of CA online is primarily “concentrated on the kind of adjacency pairs found at the initiation of a thread, [for example, a question and answer] or on the decontextualized contents of individual postings” (p. 4). Notwithstanding these limits, studies such as Gibson’s (2009) reading of textual talk are demonstrating the value of three core questions for online exchanges: how is turn-taking managed; how are turns linked as two-part sequences (such as question and answer); and how are topics negotiated?

This focus on what participants are doing lends itself to the layering of CA with discursive psychology (DP) (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996). DP studies conversational corpora from everyday and institutional settings (Potter, 2010) with a view to “how people do psychological things—emotions, memory, gender, identity, knowledge—in talk and texts, as discourse” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 665). And although typical data for DP have included transcripts from audio-taped, real-time, face-to-face discussions such as therapeutic and medical sessions (Auburn & Lea, 2003) or telephone conversations from a child protection helpline (Potter & Hepburn, 2003), a DP perspective has recently been brought to bear on asynchronous, online discussions. The move from live conversations to online exchanges is a significant one, methodologically and epistemologically, and is documented comprehensively in the literature review by Paulus, Warren, and Lester (2016). The authors trace the use of CA methods to understand online talk since the 1990s and observe that studies are using CA to understand “the mundane conversations typical of traditional CA studies, as well as institutional talk from school, counseling, and workplace settings” (Paulus, Warren, & Lester, 2016, p. 7). Of the four main aims identified by the authors, the current study comes closest to “understanding how social actions are accomplished asynchronously” (Paulus et al., 2016, p. 1). Having said this, in reference to Herring (2013), the authors make the crucial point that “the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication has become less useful over time as modalities have converged” (Paulus et al., 2016, p. 4).

As we now sample a brief exchange between a researcher, a teacher, and two parents taking part in an online discussion forum, we do so informed both by a concern with “a single question about any action (or indeed any component of any action): *why that now*” (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, p. 13) and by an interest in “how ‘psychology’ and ‘reality’ are produced, dealt with and

made relevant by participants in and through interaction” (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2005, p. 595). CA and DP, then, are the methodological reference points informing this sampling of an interaction among adult stakeholders in public education; in fact, an institutional interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992) among adult stakeholders in public education. This last point highlights the fact the interaction is occurring as part of a research project and is constituted by the identities and activities that are occasioned by this type of context.

The caution, here, however, is that context refers not to setting but to action, that is, what participants are doing: “the institutionality of an interaction is not determined by its setting. Rather, interaction is institutional insofar as participants’ institutional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, pp. 3–4.). Understood thus, Potter and Hepburn (2005) raise a further provocative quandary: “are they [participants] speaking as individuals with an institutional identity or as persons with their own unique and idiosyncratic preferences” (p. 293)? Once again, for the purposes of the current study, I take direction from Potter (1996) and tread a middle ground focused on “*talk and text as parts of social practices*” (1996, p. 105). In other words, my interpretive way forward veers neither toward the personal nor the institutional in reading the online exchange. Indeed, as Potter and Hepburn (2005) put it, “the challenging nature of the question makes answering in a more generalized way a more useful resource” (p. 15).

The Online Exchange

The following exchange took place at a workshop where participants were given an opportunity to post to the recently created online forum. Notwithstanding Herring’s (2013) caution around the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication, for the purposes of the current study the exchange can be described as both synchronous and asynchronous, or what Garcia and Jacobs (1999) label quasi-synchronous: “although posted messages are available synchronously to participants, the message production process is available only to the person composing the message” (p. 339). Although the exchange took place with all four participants sitting at the same table in the school library in real time, the elapsed time between turns was much longer than it would have been in a typical face-to-face conversation. These longer time intervals were partly a function of the participants being new to the platform and partly a function of the two parent participants being minority language speakers. The two parents taking part in the online exchange opted to write in English rather than their minority language.

Researcher: At our gathering on December 4, issues we connected to literacy were trust between schools and families and the ability of parents to get along with each other. Is it helpful for you to think about these issues as literacy? If so, why and how might that help us with strategies for moving the work of the school and its families forward?

Teacher: The word ‘trust’ has broad meanings here. Trust in the education system, trust that any concerns or questions will be answered effectively, trust in the school environment.

Parent 1: I fully agree with what you said. Some parents think that the school environment is a childcare system in the sense that when they drop their child off, their job as parents is done. Not so, I have learned so much from volunteering. My personal experience leads me to understand that when a parent/parents are involved with their child/children's education, it's amazing how much more comfortable all will be in being educated.

Parent 2: I will add that it is very true that for student engagement to happen it is necessary for the home and school to be connected with trust and the desire to communicate with each other.

Analysis

The researcher's post is the first exchange in this institutional interaction and by referring to a previous face-to-face discussion he is able to generate the topic, in this case literacy. He is also able to project and thereby further manage the topic by concluding with a question about literacy. The researcher is playing a moderating role, but in this post, he is also playing a directing role by initiating and thereby putting the topic into play.

The teacher's response is noteworthy here for at least two reasons. In the first instance, although she doesn't explicitly correct the researcher (what CA would term a repair), she does redirect the topic from literacy to trust. In this sense, the teacher responds to part, but not all, of the researcher's post. Schegloff and Sacks' (1973) notion of *topic shading* may be helpful in explaining the teacher's response in that it "involves no specific attention to ending a topic at all, but rather the fitting of differently focused but related talk to some last utterance in a topic's development" (p. 305). Again, although the teacher doesn't explicitly end the topic of literacy, she does fit a different focus, in this case on trust, to the researcher's utterance. The second point concerns the positioning of the teacher's response, that is, the teacher, rather than a parent, is the first to respond to the researcher. In being the first to respond to the researcher and in using this response to redirect the topic, the teacher signals familiarity with and, notably, expertise around literacy. This expression of expertise can be understood as a rhetorical move asserting superiority, at least in the context of formal education. From the perspective of epistemics in social interaction (Heritage, 2013), one might suggest that the teacher's *epistemic stance* (Heritage, 2013, p. 377), that is, the teacher's "moment-by-moment expression of these [social] relationships" (Heritage, 2013, p. 377) with the other participants, is also the deployment of an inequality. After all, it is the teacher who signals an awareness of broad meanings of trust. This manifestation of professional advantage situates the teacher's response as knowledgeable. Admittedly, the researcher leaves this option open by linking literacy to a number of related issues, and the teacher seizes on this opportunity.

The position of the first parent's response, that is, after researcher and teacher is important in that she constructs a tertiary position, third-in-line to the initiative of the researcher and the expertise of the teacher. Notably, although she "fully agrees," she makes no reference to either literacy or trust. The discursive import of her "fully agrees" is to perform her own redirection of the topic, this time in the direction of parenting. Situated outside the institutional authority of researcher and teacher, the first parent defines herself by her commitment to her child's education and by her knowledge as a parent. She may be negotiating from a perceived position of lesser institutional authority and prestige, and she contests this disadvantage by expressing her commitment to her child's education and to her own knowledge as a parent.

The second parent's place in this sequence of turns is significant in that, although she comments immediately after the first parent, she doesn't respond to the first parent but rather crafts her remarks in response to the researcher and teacher. In other words, although the second parent comments immediately after the first parent, she doesn't respond as directly to the first parent as she does to the researcher through a reference to home and school and to the teacher through a reference to trust. Here we see a bypassing of the first parent's response. Why the

second parent proceeds in this way is a matter of speculation: if we knew for sure whether the second parent had seen the first parent's post and taken this into account when composing their own post, a case could be made for *skip-connecting* (Sacks, 1995, p. 349), a turn-taking where "a speaker produces an utterance which is indeed related to some prior utterance, but it's not related to the directly prior utterance, but some utterance prior to the directly prior utterance." Having said this, because we only have a record of the second parents' post in the exchange, unlike Garcia and Jacobs (1998) who "videotaped recordings of each participant's computer screen in order to capture the interactional process of producing the conversation" (p. 337), the timing of composition and transmission is unknown.

What we can say is the second parent does make an explicit attempt to present a factual response, grounding her comments in what is true and necessary. The second parent does not validate the first parent but rather constructs a factual account that connects her to the researcher and teacher. Like the first parent, she may be working from a position of lesser institutional authority and prestige, and she contests this disadvantage by bypassing the first parent to take up a conversation with the initiator (the researcher) and the expert (the teacher).

Key Observations

The first observation to be made is that the topic undergoes a series of redirections. The topic moves from the researcher's invitation to talk about literacy to the teacher's preference for trust to the first parent's focus on parenting to the second parent's recast toward fact, what is true and necessary. On a first reading of these redirections of the topic, one might be tempted to suggest that the topic is paramount. After all, why would it be contested if it weren't? However, if we take direction from what the topic redirections are doing rather than what they mean in a thematic sense, in other words, if we consider the performative aspect of the topic redirections rather than the way they are shifting the content of the discussion from literacy to trust to parenting to facts, the online exchange emerges as a function of participants doing things rather than as a discussion about things.

The second observation is that the sequence of the redirections informs identities. Four distinct identities take shape in the exchange: researcher as authority, teacher as expert via professional knowledge, parent as expert via experience with parenthood, and parent as expert via holder of factual knowledge. As participants negotiate identities, these identities take shape in relation to each other, certainly, but also relative to the ordering in the exchange: the researcher as authority happens in the first turn where there is an opportunity to define the discussion; the teacher as expert via professional knowledge occurs in the second turn as a response to the researcher and as a pre-emptive move to the parents; the parent as expert via experience with parenthood in the third turn occurs relative to the expertise of the teacher and authority of the researcher; and the parent as expert via holder of factual knowledge in the fourth turn bypasses the experiential knowledge of the first parent in the third turn and connects back to the credibility of teacher and researcher in the first two turns. In this way, identities take shape in direct relation to the relative ordering in the exchange.

DP and CA: A Summative Assessment

In considering the relative merits of this preferred methodology, CA and DP, I turn my attention now to the issue of what it has enabled in this sampling of an online exchange between a

researcher, a teacher, and two parents.

In the first instance, it has allowed for a direct analysis of the “interactional business” (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2007, p. 467) taking place online, that is, participants redirecting topics and manifesting position-contingent identities. This is crucial since it opens a sustained focus on what the participants are doing as they interact in and through language. This focus, in turn, informs a further discussion around the implications of this doing for the online forum itself and, in an extended sense, for an understanding of relationships between families and schools.

With respect to the online forum, if it is to serve the goals of the larger research project, namely, to forge new kinds of interactional patterns between minority families and their children’s schools, it needs to be flexible and fluid both in architecture and mission. To be clear, this is not to characterize the online interaction thus far as a failure but rather to look forward to its future potential as meaningful and actionable collaboration. In realizing this potential, online activity need not be generated exclusively via discussion topics (as was the case with literacy in the excerpt under analysis). In fact, the online activity can be approached discursively, that is, as a space where things get done, for example, where stakeholders strategize a response to a school-based challenge; or where minority parents access a clearinghouse for employment opportunities; or where newcomers to Canada receive language training.

In the second instance, as a supplement if not alternative to the existing face-to-face interactions between the school and its families, the online forum can be organized so relative positions in the sequence of posts are less likely to repeat. This is a key insight brought into focus by a methodology shaped by DP and CA: since the same pattern of participant posts may predetermine and constrain the identities that take shape alongside relative turns, the pattern that takes place in this exchange would be well served by an interruption. Once again, this suggestion is not a response to a perceived failure but rather a looking forward to meaningful and actionable collaboration. On this issue, perhaps the researcher should not necessarily take the first turn. In fact, any moderator, even if this moderator happens to be a parent, should not necessarily take the first turn. The point here is that setting the groundwork for a variable sequence of turns may open a space for varied identities to take shape and enable agency across participants, especially those who have not typically had this privilege in discussions around education. In future online activity, this possibility can be explored.

Taking its cue from these two DP and CA supported implications—that the interaction among stakeholders is where things get done and where they can get done in a way that is not predetermined—an updated understanding of relationships between families and schools can revision the narrative of collaboration. Although varied stakeholders can surely collaborate in the shared goal of academic success and healthy development for children and adolescents, this collaboration should not be conflated with consensus. (Indeed, one could argue there is a kind of false consensus in the talk, where the preferred responses that people give can sound like agreement despite the cross-purposes.) This would be a category mistake, since the relationships among parents and schools and school boards and governments are characterized by multiple concerns that may not follow the same trajectory or chronology. Simply put, varied stakeholders do different things even while collaborating around ostensibly shared goals. For example, for a ministry of education, a healthy schools initiative may serve the goals of a broader political platform; for various school boards the initiative may be integrated into a pre-existing plan for raising academic test results; for a school the initiative may become a reaching out effort to a particular community; and for parents the initiative may be leveraged to focus on neighbourhood resources such as child supervision, public transport, and local libraries.

A core insight that a CA and DP informed methodology highlights is the discursive fact that one shared goal can generate multiple agendas with multiple constituencies getting multiple things done. The interface of families and schools can be a very busy place! At first glance, these multiplicities might suggest a way forward that is orderly, organized, and coordinated. This is to say the doings of varied stakeholders would be synchronized to prevent confusion, maximize results, and avoid working at cross-purposes. However, the online forum under analysis in this study is suggestive for an approach that allows for things to get done in varied ways. In the same way that a sequence of turns that is not predetermined may enable agency across participants online, a greater tolerance for multiple agendas working themselves out in their own ways may move the practices of publicly-funded education in a positive direction. Returning to the example of the healthy schools initiative, a parent focus on neighbourhood resources such as child supervision, public transport, and local libraries may have an impact on or even supplant a school board's focus on raising academic test results; or a school's concern with being more inclusive toward particular communities may exert sufficient force to redirect a government's political platform.

The wider point here is that though collaboration can function as an umbrella, it must acknowledge, once again, that under this umbrella are the multiple agendas of multiple constituencies getting multiple things done in a fluid and evolving way. This is an observation brought into view by one strand of DP and CA as a methodology, namely, ontological constructionism, which "describe[s] the configurations of identity and subjectivity which result at particular moments and which might be maintained for shorter and longer durations" (Wetherell, 2007, p. 672). Indeed, a close analysis of how stakeholders speak to each other in day to day exchanges both online and in person may prove suggestive for the study of minority populations in Canadian education. In the online exchange sampled here, this would also include the epistemological constructionist point that "participants in an interaction construct their accounts and formulate versions of events, including formulations of their own and others' psychological states" (Wetherell, 2007, p. 671). In the final assessment, in this study DP and CA allow for both depth and breadth of interpretation, demonstrating that the micro-social dynamic of people in conversation may hold keys to unlocking the greater potential for the narrative of collaboration to move us toward a responsive and democratic, if less orderly, system of education.

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