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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a research process that evolved as the researchers considered a study they conducted with kindergarten children, in which the process problematized the research construct of participant/observer. The paper is informed by poststructuralist theory as the participant/observers are observed. According to the paper, a poststructuralist reading of the work demands a critical stance of the researchers' thinking as researchers acknowledging that the research is constituted as much by the researcher's positionality as the research participants. The paper states that there is a double focus to the analysis: first, discussion centers on the experience of the kindergartners; and second, the focus changes to the teacher/researcher. It aims to present an analysis of the shifting multiple discursive practices evident in the classroom during a series of drama lessons. The paper's research study involved investigating if drama work could support the students in developing a critical response to some picture books, that is, if they could consider the literary texts in ways that were beyond a literal response. Stating that it is not possible to assume a position "outside" of the research process as the self is implied in the research process, the paper suggests that researchers may more beneficially behave as if research constructs multiple ways of seeing differently. (Contains 2 transcripts and 11 references.) (NKA)

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Metaxis in classroom research: Why Chicken Little ran away

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Introduction

This paper reports on a research process that evolved as the authors considered a study they conducted with Kindergarten children. The process problematised the research construct of participant/observer. The term participant/observer presumes that multiplicity is inherent: as participant, the researcher 'takes part', becomes part of what is happening; simultaneously, as observer, the researcher maintains a thoughtful distance to critically observe the process in which she is taking part. This state is at once a "multifaceted and contradictory" (Reid et al, 1996, p.87) given the range of discourses that inform the researcher's positioning in the classroom. Yet these qualities of participant/observer are often unconsidered as researchers place themselves 'outside' their research to focus on what happened.

In this paper we are informed by poststructuralist theory as we observe the participant/observer. A poststructuralist reading of our work demands that we become critical of our own thinking as researchers acknowledging that the research is constituted as much by the researcher's positionality as the research participants. There is a double focus to the analysis. First, the discussion centres on the experience of the kindergarten children. Second, the focus changes to the teacher/researcher. Our aim is to present an analysis of the shifting multiple discursive practices evident in the classroom during a series of drama lessons. We argue that there is a need to "theorise our own positions to situate ourselves politically, subjectively, historically, socially within the processes we are describing." (Threadgold 1988, p.63) For example, as researcher, the teacher is still responsible for curriculum, and for maintaining classroom discipline; yet the investments the teacher has may come into conflict with the researcher's interests in following an event to its end. The discourses that inform the researcher may create an interest in change, an interest in resistance to typical or expected ways of being.

The study

Our research involved doing drama with a kindergarten class and we were partners in a parallel research project with Cambridge, England. We were interested in investigating if drama work could support these young students in developing a critical response to some picture books, that is, if they could consider the literary texts in ways that were beyond a literal response. The sequence included the initial meeting of the outside researcher (Lorraine) with the class and their teacher (Alyson, the co-researcher) and some preparation drama work carried out prior to the use of the target text. In this way, the children's developing facility as critical readers could be tracked.

We planned to offer the children multiple reading positions, drawing on a social model of reading practices (Luke and Freebody 1999) where they could decode the texts through listening, participate in retellings of the stories and enact alternative ways of being in the stories - thus they would use the texts in various ways. We adopted a traditional ethnomethodological research process of participant/observation as the basis for the study that involved Alyson teaching a sequence of drama lessons based on literary texts. These lessons were recorded on videotape by Lorraine over weeks in November-December 1999.

Multiple Subject Positions

The first text we used was a version of the well-known Chicken Little story- the one where a number of different animal characters gather to tell others "the sky is falling" and finally get eaten by the fox. Here we asked the students to draw on their knowledge of the story they had just listened to and briefly discussed, in order to re-enact some scenes in role as characters. Effectively, as researchers who had planned the lesson, we thought we had positioned the students as listeners (decoders), and as participants in the story. That is not what happened, however. As Transcript 1 below shows, the students resisted the story's conclusion as given and constructed a new one for themselves. Here the complexity of all the participants' multiple subject positions are very apparent - for example, we can see complex

relations between students and teacher, between children and an adult, between actors and their director, and between teacher and researcher. When the children changed the storyline, the teacher vs researcher conflict was so strong that a conscious decision was made by A-as-teacher to let A-as-researcher take control of the situation. In effect A-as-teacher literally sat back and watched while children clambered over each other, calling out and trying to 'escape'.

Transcript 1

Line no.	Name	Text	Action
1	Foxy Loxy	Where are you going in such a hurry?	He approaches the group of children acting as the animals
2	Chicken Little	We're going to tell the king the sky is falling!	The animals wait in line
3	Foxy Loxy	I know where the king lives. I'll show you.	He leads the way to the corner of the room
4	Teacher	Your lair's over here I think Foxy Loxy.	Foxy Lox leads the animals into his den
5	Narrator	And they all followed Foxy Loxy. Oh, there's the marching Turkey Lurkey and the waddling Ducky Lucky. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Now in you all go.	The animals gather in the den but Foxy Loxy crawls out
6	Teacher	Oh Foxy Loxy, you left them in there. Are they still alive? (Whisper) Are you going to eat them up?	
7	Children	Excited squeals	Foxy Loxy goes back in and pretends to eat them but they all escape.

Why would Alyson do this? Because the children's response was not planned, they had clearly made choices that rejected the plot. While A-as-teacher's authority was being challenged, A-as-researcher needed to see where this resistance would lead them. The research need was stronger, so she watched as the children noisily rewrote the story for themselves - knowing that to stop them would be to forestall an interesting episode. Thus both the children and teacher 'broke the rules' of classroom discourses - we would argue that this is metaxis in action.

Metaxis

Metaxis has been defined as "the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds" (Boal 1995, p.43). We have used the term 'metaxis' as it is used in drama work, to capture the tension of the dual perception of the world that occurs for the actors, and can occur for the audience (the spectators, the observers): a state where one can be both oneself and someone other than oneself. We have used the term as a way of theorising a moment which went 'wrong', the moment, we argue, when subject positions collided. The moment developed because the children did not simply 'act out' the story as read and prepared. Once in the fox's den the actors realized what the story said was going to happen and as characters they rejected it. Instead they scrambled to escape. The video shows them tripping over each other in their hurry to get away while the child/fox lets them go. They have abandoned all notions of acting out the story and instead are resisting the position in which they are placed because they are ambivalent about the outcome. They interrupt the notion of the unified self that would have had them (as actors) accept their own 'death' and take up more positive positions that allow them to escape.

As we examined our video of this lesson, we accepted that it is expected that as adults we can reflect on our own multiplicity. But what is more fascinating to note is that the children were also able clearly to "catch [themselves]" (Davies 1999, p.22) in the different subject positions into which they were constructed by the drama.

Metaxis in Action

The Chicken Little drama affords a marvellous example of children moving from one conflicting subject position to another in a matter of seconds. After the transcribed scene presented above, when the children rejected the storyline, Alyson brought the children together to discuss what happened and we contend that they were able to rationalize the shifts they made in terms of their investments in different discourses. For example, in this discussion, the discourse of the family is evident when, speaking as an animal, one said: "My chicken mum would be upset if I didn't come home this afternoon". Another rejects the story discourse when she said, "I didn't want the fox to eat me".

One strong example of Metaxis in action can be seen in Bradley, the boy who played the fox. In the previous transcript Alyson repositioned Bradley into the story discourse with the question, "are you going to eat them up?" line 6. In the following Transcript 2 we see Bradley shifting from accepting the story discourse and taking three other discursive positions in a matter of seconds. First he calls on biology as an explanation " We don't have big enough mouths." Line 9. Second, he extends his reasons through school discourses when he states "You'd get in big trouble and you'd get a yellow card" line 17 (this is part of the school's discipline routines) and third agrees with Alyson's use of family discourse in line 18 "the mums and dads wouldn't be very happy either".

Transcript 2

8	Teacher	I think B was a bit surprised because in the story the fox got to eat all the animals but in this story the fox didn't really get to eat anybody.	Children sprawled on carpet listening while B sits on a table at the front talking to teacher.
9	B	No, because we can't eat chi.. eat other .. We don't have big enough mouths.	
10	Teacher	Real people can't eat each other you mean?	
11	B	No	
12	Teacher	Oh, and you mean because we're at school?	
13	B	Yeh	
14	Teacher	That you couldn't really eat them up?	
15	B	No, you wouldn't be allowed to	
16	Teacher	Why not? Why couldn't he eat you up? It was in the story. Why couldn't he eat you up?	
17	B	Because you'd get in big trouble and you'd get a yellow card.	
18	Teacher	Haha! You'd get in big trouble and you'd get a yellow card if B ate somebody up! And I tell you what, the mums and dads wouldn't be very happy either.	
19	B	Mmm.	

It is our contention that the drama process helped these young students to experience different ways of being. We assert that we have been able to capture metaxis in action as the students draw on a variety of discursive practices to justify their actions in the story world of the text. In poststructuralist terms the children were "constituted and reconstituted through the discursive practices they [had] access to in their daily lives" (Davies 1993:11). In our work on another text, Ruby (Glen 1990), we were able to develop the children's involvement with the text further than a simple reading would. They became the bears in the box stamped with an S by the tired factory worker, they decided which toy to be in the "Best Toyshop in town", they argued in character with Ruby in the bedroom, they apologized for hurting Ruby's feelings when they pushed her.

Although our initial purpose was to 'observe' the children, it became clear that to do so would be to ignore how important the 'participation' of the researcher was to the project. In other forums we could argue for the role of drama in extending young readers beyond a literal reading of a text but here our purpose is to examine the participant/observer role. The drama work here also reveals the researchers' shifting subject positions.

Planned Metaxis

Typically research explores the experience of the participants in the research - as we just have. But what we want to draw attention to is how the participants' experience is planned and constructed at the beck and whim of the researcher - and in this case – the researchers/ teacher/ participant/ observers. As we considered the video data and the transcripts, we began to ask ourselves whose version of the research tale had we told? Of course ultimately it is ours but in paying attention to whom we allowed/edited to speak and who we silenced we can reflect on the way we constructed the research in terms of what was acceptable/possible (Davies 1999, p.14). For example, a different lesson based on the Ruby picture book, Alyson takes up different discursive subject positions. In this session are discourses of drama, with Alyson as teacher-in-role as a tired factory worker who makes teddybears - her previous day's work has resulted in a lot of teddybear 'mistakes' which she then proceeds to 'throw out'; discourses of school with her teacher comment "What I'd like you to do is to say it in a loud voice" (a

change of voice is apparent in the video). Later, discourses of video production required us to consider what were the most audible and coherent aspects of Lorraine's (very) amateur video work as we tried to reduce hours of video to relevant moments. Here we were constituted by academic discourses of what constructed an interesting conference presentation of 20 minutes length! Similarly, authoring this paper produced several drafts. And it was during all of these moments that we reflected on our practice and began to observe the many ways we 'polished' the research for public showing in a range of venues, and to exemplify the arguments we were constructing.

Conclusion

Teachers are encouraged to use research in their classrooms to create "positive change through research and reflection" (Knobel and Lankshear 1999 p14). We would emphasize the importance of reflection, not for its own sake but to enable the researcher to stand back from her work whilst taking part in it. For it is only when we become aware of the "self as researcher with personal motives which inform [our] research" (Davies 1999 p14) that we can examine what we are doing as a particular set of social practices informed by a range of different discourses. It is not possible to assume a position 'outside' of the research process as the self is implied in the research process.

Chicken Little got into trouble because she was looking at the world from a single viewpoint, her own. Poststructuralist theory suggests that it is not possible to maintain a unified or single identity. Rather, like our resistant actors, we suggest that researchers may more beneficially behave as if research constructs multiple ways of seeing differently. That is, instead of following a single path that leads to one conclusion, we would promote the potential of research that recognizes a number of possibilities. In this way we can theorize the research process as a "series of analytic mirrors, each reflecting the image which the other captures so that multiple perspectives of the same interaction may be seen simultaneously" (Simpson 1997 p246).

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