

# Great Minds Think Alike, or Do They? Juxtaposing Contextual and Peripheral Perspectives on Data

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study was to explore different interpretations made through the dialogic interplay of a classroom ethnographic researcher (contextual researcher) and a research analyst (peripheral researcher) as we collaborated on interpretations of data from an elementary school classroom. Using sociolinguistic discourse technique, we examined two events involving guest teachers, the first of which was a frame clash that illustrated an outsider view of a classroom culture. In contrast, the second event provided more of an insider understanding of the classroom culture. This resulting contrastive analysis stemmed from the dialogic interpretation of both researchers and combining of theoretical perspectives. The interplay of perspectives between the researchers revealed a higher level of analysis and interpretation that led to a more robust synthesis and a more complex explanation of the findings.*

**Key Words:** Discourse, Dialogic Interpretation, Classroom Culture, Collaborative Analysis

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore what different interpretations could be made through the dialogic interplay of an ethnographic classroom researcher (contextual researcher) and an affiliated research analyst (peripheral researcher) as we collaborated on interpretations of data from an elementary school classroom. Using a sociolinguistic discourse technique, we recognized during our analysis that we each played a different role due to our relationship to the data. The contextual researcher collected the data on site, and was an integral part of the research setting, thus representing a contextualized view of the data. The peripheral researcher was one who had research knowledge and familiarity with the theoretical approach and was analyzing the data as an outsider to the sociocultural context of the classroom. Being peripheral to the classroom and the data, this researcher brought a different, yet equally important perspective to the analysis.

First of all, the level of robustness of contact with the data was different between the researchers. In addition, we found that a reciprocal dialogic process developed between us as we worked through the interpretation of the data. For example, the contextual researcher interpreted the data through her theoretical perspective and according to her familiarity with the classroom culture. The peripheral researcher noted something within that interpretation and questioned it. In order to explain the interpretation, the contextual researcher then expanded on the context of the

data because of the richer knowledge gained through being a participant observer during the ethnographic study. This dialogic reciprocity resulted in an enriched dialogic interpretation.

For purposes of this illustrative study, our research question was: What is accomplished through the dialogic interpretation between the contextual researcher using primary data and the peripheral researcher, for whom the data set is secondary? We make visible the process of dialogic interpretation as evidenced in our first example (Table 1), as well as the results of the dialogic interplay between the researchers as evidenced in the second example (Table 2).

## Methods

The data analyzed for this study were collected from a public elementary school with a highly diverse population, in which 85% of the students received free or reduced lunch. The data set was selected from among four years of classroom data involving fifth-grade students and their teacher, who used a particular student-oriented classroom governance system initiated as part of her social studies curriculum. We chose two particular events for analysis from the data set because they represented a frame clash (Green, 1983) between classroom participants and an outsider negotiating access to the classroom culture. A frame clash can be thought of as the difference in perceptions of a phenomenon, either overt or covert. Overt clashes are observed contrast points, while covert frame clashes are ones that require retrospective and finer grained analysis. This overt frame clash between the first guest teacher and the participants in the selected 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom became a rich point (Agar, 1994) to illustrate contrasts in instructional approach. Specifically, the first guest teacher's approach contrasted with the classroom teacher's approach as she took the role of teacher to be that of purveyor of knowledge. The contrastive analysis illustrates that the second guest teacher's approach aligned more closely with that of the classroom teacher when she encouraged student ownership of learning.

### Analytic Approach

Using a sociolinguistic discourse analytic technique (Putney, 2007) the contextual researcher selected the particular data set to analyze as illustrative of a frame clash (Green, 1983) and rich point (Agar, 1994) in an ethnographic study. The contextual researcher produced a transcript of the video data, along with field notes, which the peripheral researcher independently reviewed while highlighting potential domains related to the teacher and student roles in the classroom setting. Both the contextual and peripheral researchers brought together their analyses and collaboratively examined themes to see how they might inform one another.

### *Frame Clash Analysis, Event 1*

This fifth-grade classroom was one in which the contextual researcher had been working with the teacher and students as part of an ethnographic study of their classroom community. The classroom was one in which the students elected a governing body and was, in the words of the teacher, a "Kid Operated Community" (see Putney, Jones & Campbell, 2017). They constructed together a set of norms, or ways in which they lived and worked together. In the first selected event that constituted a frame clash (Green, 1983), a guest teacher came to talk with the students about the meaning of Tolerance. As was customary at the beginning of the classroom period, Jaz, a student designated as the classroom mayor, led the class in reviewing their norms. Standing at the overhead projector, she called on other students to read each of the norms illustrated on the

projector transparency sheet. Upon completing her task in leading the discussion, Jaz relinquished her role as class leader to the guest teacher so that she could begin her lecture.

In Table 1 we illustrate the frame clash (Green, 1983) event in which the actions of the guest teacher conflicted with the norms and expectations of the classroom participants. As the guest teacher began, Jaz hesitated before returning to her desk and attempted to hand over the marker for the overhead projector. The guest teacher indicated that she had no need for the marker, and after Jaz persisted by asking if she wanted to take notes, the classroom teacher helped to clarify by asking the guest teacher if she wanted to write on the overhead projector with the marker. Again the guest teacher indicated no by shaking her head, while also putting her right hand up in a stop motion gesture directed at the student. At this point the guest teacher continued with her lecture.

**Table 1**

*Clash Between Guest Teacher Actions and Classroom Norms*

Interaction Unit	Actor	Message Unit/Action Unit	MU/AU Potential Divergence
Guest begins teaching	Guest teacher	Good morning! Uhm, my name is Ms. B and I have been, um//	
Potential divergent exchange between guest and class mayor, who offers overhead pen as a handing over of the teaching role	Teacher/students		Shhh//(If, uhm, hmm)
	Jaz		(Gestures to Guest teacher with pen at overhead)
			Excuse me (to Guest teacher) Would you like to take notes?
	Guest teacher		No (shakes head no) Do you want to take notes?
	Female student		No, She's asking you
	Teacher		"Do you want to write?" ok?
	Guest teacher		Oh, no, that's ok.
	Guest teacher	I've been a teacher since, uhm, 1966. More years than I want to count.	
Teacher	(chuckles)		

What is significant in this event is that the peripheral researcher analyzed this segment of data between the classroom participants who understood the norms of taking on the role of teacher and the guest teacher, who was not privy to the expectations and actions as part of the norms. However, in reviewing the data together, the contextual researcher noted that not only did this illustrate a frame clash (Green, 1983), but also noted the underlying messaging that was occurring in the moment. From having worked in the classroom from the first day of school, the contextual researcher interpreted the handing over of the overhead projector marker as a symbolic action related to the role of teacher. In that moment of offering the overhead marker, Jaz indicated that she was no longer leading the classroom discussion, and she was, in effect, handing over the primary teaching role to the teacher, just as she had done every day prior. The guest teacher did not understand the significance of this action and negated the handing over by using the stop gesture. This misunderstanding caused some confusion on the part of Jaz, which prompted further explanation by the classroom teacher.

This interpretation was made visible by the contextual researcher because, as the classroom ethnographer, she had witnessed this handing over as part of the norms and rituals of this classroom culture. As is commonly noted in classroom culture literature, outsiders can easily break the norms because they are not aware of the rituals of the classroom (Putney & Frank, 2008). The norms were not immediately evident to the peripheral researcher because she had not been studying specifically the norms and expectations from the first day of class. Coming to the data set without having been an observer still allowed her to interpret the data and establish domains related to the manifest (Berg, 2001) or more evident meanings of the teacher and student roles. However, the contextual researcher added to the interpretation with the knowledge of the latent or underlying meaning (Berg, 2001) held in the ritual of handing over the overhead marker.

### ***Contrastive Analysis, Event 2***

The data for this event emanated from one fifth-grade classroom on two different days of instruction, with two different guest teachers, which came to light due to the analysis by the peripheral researcher. The value of the peripheral researcher in the analytic process is that the peripheral researcher brings her voice to the interpretation of the data. In this instance, this voice had been shaped by her past experience as a classroom teacher, which added a lens for interpreting the data (Table 2). In addition the peripheral researcher took up a socio-cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1997) in terms of examining the data through the lens of student efficacy.

In Table 2 we noted two contrasting teaching styles evident in the distinct ways in which the guest teachers negated students' responses. What the peripheral researcher noticed was the more typical IRE (Initiate-Response-Evaluate) teaching style (Mehan, 1979) used by the first guest teacher when she initiated questions of the students and then evaluated their responses in the negative when they did not present the answer she had in mind. Specifically, the first guest teacher, using traditional instruction, did not provide any prompts or scaffolding for student learning. The feedback to students was either simply negative or it stopped at asking the students for more information. It can be argued that this style of feedback placed the teacher as separate from the students in an authoritative role. Students were not engaging in the lesson to the extent that we had seen in other instances because they stopped responding to the guest teacher's questions and she continued with more of a lecture style to give the information to them. Students may have viewed their knowledge as incorrect and their attempts to learn new information as unacceptable based on the type of feedback provided by the guest teacher.

In contrast, the second guest teacher used a sociocultural form of instruction that related more closely to the established classroom norms and discourse than the traditional form used by the first guest teacher. For example, the second guest teacher sought clarification from the students by incorporating the student answers and then extending the discussion to include new information brought forth by the students. The students remained engaged in the discussion, offering their own examples and ideas related to the concepts being presented. This guest teacher encouraged students to persist in their attempts of correctly defining the newly introduced term.

**Table 2**

*Negating Student Responses vs. Seeking Clarification: Comparison of Instructional Types*

Response Type		Guest Teacher 1: Traditional Approach	Guest Teacher 2: SocioCultural Approach
Negating student response	No prompts provided	Nope. Nope. Nope. You didn't tell me. It's hard. It's so hard to say what a victim is. Nope. Nope. Nope.	
	Encourages further thinking by restating term to be defined		Not quite, not quite. A perpetrator
Seeking clarification	No prompts provided	What does that mean? You didn't tell me. You just used the word.	
	Provides clarification by incorporating student response		Right. So, you're just standing by and watching. You're not going to help either person.
	Extends discussion to include new term introduced by student		That's interesting...That's a little bit different interpretation. That's sort of an instigator... You're thinking in terms of they're not starting it but they're kind of getting in there and getting somebody else to start the fight or start crossing the boundaries.

Moreover, the use of the phrase *Not quite* as a form of negation still kept the door open for students to continue their efforts of defining a new term while providing guidance that the response given was not quite correct. In addition, the ways in which the second guest teacher provided clarification to the students validated the students' responses and integrated their responses into the accepted definition of the new terms.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Combining analysis from the contextual and peripheral researchers created a different research path because of the dialogic interpretation, resulting in a different analysis than what may be derived by the contextual researcher on her own. Key to this process of analysis is the dialogic interaction of examining data from two perspectives and finding either commonality or perhaps even evolving into a third dimensionality of theory (e.g., Putney & Broughton, 2011 for the construct of Collective Classroom Efficacy). The peripheral researcher brought a knowledge-base of research on the role of efficacy in learning, which added another dimension to the dialogic analysis. The peripheral researcher took on the role of actuator in this process because her perspective sparked the contextual researcher to reveal classroom cultural information they had not considered up to that point.

The interplay of perspectives between the researchers revealed a higher level of analysis and interpretation that led to a more robust synthesis and a more complex explanation of the findings. Collectively we added almost spontaneously to one another's thoughts as we worked through the analytic process, due in large part to the intersubjectivity and historicity (Putney, 2007) we created around the research. The historicity takes in the relationship we built together where it was safe to share ideas and counter-interpretations of the data.

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