Literacy Research Methodologies

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CHAPTER 4

Discourse Analysis

Conversation

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In this chapter we discuss research on oral discourse in education. This is not a "how-to" chapter. There is already a considerable body of published information on ways to record and analyze oral discourse, much of relevant to the classroom. There are also reviews of research containing exemplary studies of classroom discourse (e.g., Cazden, 1988). Yet it remains important for students of educational research in literacy to ask, "What is oral discourse, and why study it in research on literacy education?" There are numerous answers to this question, many of them emanating from practical concerns of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom management. However, underlying these are fundamental questions about the role of oral discourse in the social construction of knowledge, power, and identity in classrooms, schools, and elsewhere in society. Our chapter focuses on such questions. *Discourse* is a technical term defined and used in a variety of ways in research on oral communication and literacy education. We use the term in two different, though related, ways in this chapter: as instructional conversation and as a social linguistic process of being in the world.

WHAT IS DISCOURSE? WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR LITERACY EDUCATION?

Classrooms are language-rich environments, and much of that language takes the form of talk about texts, knowledge, and ideas. In cross-cultural research on thinking, for example, Cole and his associates found that the chief way in which people who experienced formal schooling differ from those who do not is in fluency manipulating concepts in and through language—both written and oral. One way to study educational discourse within school settings is by analyzing the classroom's instructional conversations—their nature, content, and purposes. For literacy researchers, the study of oral discourse is further specified as analysis of talk within what Heath (1983) called "literacy events," those situations and activities in which written text and literate practices are central to classroom talk and activity.

A related way to think about discourse is as what linguist James Gee (1996) calls a social linguistic "identity kit." Viewed this way, discourse includes but is not limited to conversation. Although it includes language, discourse is social as well as linguistic. It is a way of behaving and making sense which includes language code (as well as dialect or speech style), use of written words, social norms and values, and practice within shared activity systems. Viewed this way, the classroom offers learners one of their first opportunities to learn a "secondary discourse" as they venture out from the primary discourse into which they have been socialized by the family. In school, language and literacy learning are part of a secondary discourse, a new identity as learners in a community in which text will be central and talk will serve instructional, curricular, and assessment purposes.

Together, discourse as educational talk and discourse as a social linguistic identity kit are far from neutral. Conversation is essential to learning and sustaining participation in a discourse, but that discourse is not neutral. It is a system of sociolinguistic identification partly created by teachers and students anew in their day-to-day interactions and partly constrained by social, historical, cultural, and political forces and factors. It is by a process of reflexivity, or the mutual construction of conversation and culture, that shared meaning is possible. This meaning is hard to make explicit for analysis because, as experienced teachers and students, we take the reflexive process of communication very much for granted. Yet, as an important factor in the development of identity and literacy which is both limiting and enabling of learning and learners' futures, it is important to study educational discourse closely and critically.

CONVERSATION AND CULTURE

It is difficult to write about analysis of discourse as educational talk without addressing three key features of conversation as a cultural activity: (1) it is jointly constructed by participants in connected oral text; (2) it is a medium for the negotiation of meaning by speakers within particular social contexts; and (3) it is rule governed in order to be held in common with others, but it is also a creative act, with improvisation necessary as conversation moves from turn to turn, topic to topic.

These features work in dynamic tension and make oral language a living cultural "artifact" which, in Cole's view (1996), weaves human and cultural development and depends on species-specific biological features in interaction with cultural practices, reflecting history and anticipating futures. Yet what makes conversation so powerful and complex also makes it hard to study. Many approaches to studying conversation are used in education, from coding systems developed a priori to analyze specific features of instructional talk to ethnographic studies in which researchers learn by means of participant observation, interview of informants, analysis of recorded speech, collaboration with teachers and students as "informants," and searching for the local meanings of discourse in context.

There is a growing interest in discourse analysis among educational researchers in Europe, Australia, and the United States. Interdisciplinary fields such as sociolinguistics (Hymes, 1974) emerged in the last half of the 20th century, along with technologies making it easy to record speech in real time and naturalistic settings. These were soon applied to the study of teaching and learning in a variety of culturally diverse educational contexts (e.g., Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1974; Heath, 1983).

In addition, with the development of the social and behavioral sciences in the last century, in part to serve its emergent institutions, the study of communication grew in importance. Researchers study literacy in relationship to linguistic and social differences in communication among members of diverse cultural groups. In contemporary life, conversation and literacy are not only local but also global phenomena in which people come together rapidly and across time and distance. Thus in talk, print, audiovisual media, and cybercommunication, researchers study the power of language to organize activities and practices of communities in contact as they shape social relations, and develop knowledge and identity (New London Group, 1996).

Just as 20th-century advances in video- and audiorecording technology made capturing sequences of oral discourse in naturalistic settings feasible, it also made oral language a wider-reaching, more powerful social, educational, and political tool. In our time, digital technology makes it possible to manipulate discourse sequences so that they can be studied, in hypermedia, in a variety of revealing ways: synchronically, diachronically, comparatively, and in conjunction with other forms of textual information relevant to the talk and context under study. Thus we are able to examine oral discourse in multiple, layered situational contexts and begin to understand learning and practice within complex, indeterminate domains such as teaching (Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson, & Coulter, 1993/1995). This move from certainty to uncertainty raises the possibility that everyday practices can be analyzed, taught, and learned critically (Britzman, 2002).

ORAL DISCOURSE AND EDUCATION

Oral language plays an important role in schooling. We explicitly use talk in our teaching when, for example, we explain a concept or assess students by listening as they answer questions about what they have learned. However, the educational importance of talk extends far beyond these uses. It also can bring diverse people together and foster the learning of others' language codes and literate practices. To master the oral and written language systems is to be able to wield the power of language as a tool for communication, self-expression, creativity, and thinking.

If talk is to be a key tool for teaching and learning of the literacy curriculum, and teachers must plan for and enact it with youngsters in thoughtful ways, then classroom talk is clearly an area deserving of considerable educational research. Yet talk is often the most taken for granted aspect of our teaching, a part of tacit, local knowledge. There are a variety of approaches to the study of ordinary language, or conversation, in educational research, and these methods are linked to researchers' theories, interests, and questions (Schiffrin, 1994). Yet while they vary these approaches are loosely associated and often referenced by the term *analysis of discourse.* Scholars use the term *discourse* when referring to both oral and written language (both are also referred to as "text") and to both the process of talk and its functions in social life (see Goldman & Wiley, Chapter 5, in this volume, for a discussion of discourse analysis of written text).

Once we move beyond the sentence, it is difficult to understand how talk works as "text." Understanding text—discourse—involves far more than vocabulary and grammar. It involves understanding culture and social life. This is as true for the young child entering her first classroom as it is for the traveler who, armed with grammatical knowledge of a language, finds himself lost in the sea of its use by native speakers. Educators and researchers of education are interested in how people acquire, learn, and practice discourse as they learn to reason, to participate in a variety of activities, and as they attain mature and metacognitive awareness of discourse strategies. Participation in discourse involves a network of knowledge including the following:

- Understanding and using a spoken language system and a repertoire of accompanying paralinguistic and nonverbal behaviors.
- Knowledge of social contexts, roles, and activities within which conversations occur.
- The capacity to produce as well as interpret appropriate conversational behaviors and manage conversation's ensemble, improvisational, and negotiated qualities.

The study of conversational discourse has roots in several fields including anthropology, linguistics, sociology, cultural studies, child development, and critical theory. Discourse has been analyzed for purposes of understanding how children learn to speak, the process of language acquisition across diverse languages and culture, the ways people "do things with words" to, with, and in response to one another. Obviously, education in general (and literacy education in particular) is an area in which oral discourse is of central importance in part because words saturate the learning environment, much learning involves learning new discourses, much learning occurs in the medium of conversation, and language is a means for creating and sustaining social systems.

Given that, in schools, social forces operate to provide or limit access to knowledge, the study of oral discourse within the conversations of the classroom is one primary way to witness those forces in participants' talk and activity. Understanding the dynamics of educational conversation opens possibilities for reform. For this reason, there are different kinds of questions that oral discourse analysis addresses. Sometimes we are trying to find out about student understanding of particular school content, sometimes we are trying to understand how students are responding to literature, sometimes we are trying to understand power relations in a classroom. In addition, there are many kinds of discourse analysis, some of which might be called critical discourse analysis, some which resemble sociolinguistic study, and many which innovate in ways drawing on theory and method drawn from ethnography and sociolinguistics yet framing design, questions, and analysis to draw implications from research for policy and practice in a systematic way. Examples of these three approaches might be critical discourse analyses such as those collected in Barton and Hamilton's book, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (1998); sociolinguistic analyses such as those by Michaels (to be detailed later), and many of the studies of reading instruction among Hawaiian youngsters conducted by Kathryn Au and reviewed in detail in a review chapter by Florio-Ruane and McVee (2000) in the *Handbook of Reading Research*. Although the length and purpose of this chapter precludes detailed review of all of these, we briefly examine several exemplars of research illustrating different approaches to analysis of discourse in literacy education later in this chapter.

DOING THINGS WITH WORDS

Early studies of language in use involved anthropologists in theorizing language acquisition and use within cultures. In the mid-20th century, linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, and psychologists shared an interest in this question because to answer it would shed light on language, culture, and thought. Ordinary language philosophers in the mid-20th century were interested in referential use of talk as but one way that oral discourse functions. Linguists studying conversation found, related to this insight, that speakers often used the same form of talk to accomplish a range of different social functions (and vice versa). Thus learning to hold a conversation was about far more than taking turns or giving words to experience; it was also about shaping, reinforcing, repairing, and re-creating social life, power relations, identity, and social norms. Because, as Heath (1983) pointed out in her book on the subject, *Ways with Words*, we do so much with our talk, teachers need both knowledge of conversation's complexities and the disposition to recognize differences in discourse practices rather than to assess differences as disability or ignorance.

The analysis of oral discourse inside classrooms, families, and other social groups and settings came into its own in the United States in the mid-20th century, when both funds and public concerns converged on problems of inequality—especially unequal access to learning in school. At the same time, many disciplines were asking not only how people acquire language but how they acquire social competence—or the ability to use language to communicate. There was a burgeoning of interest in language variation of all kinds—and in the tremendous amount of experience and local knowledge encapsulated in even the simplest slice of discourse. Finally, there were learning questions of another sort—how, out of the language we exchange, are we creating, sustaining, and possibly re-creating social relationships?

Embedded in each speech act is not only referential information and culturally appropriate reading of it but a large store of situational knowledge and a local drama in which people make the sense they make out of a potentially ambiguous exchange. These are the expression of our norms, or rules for treating one another in particular ways, our values about what is important, what and who deserves our respect, our sense of etiquette, and our biases and prejudices. In the past decade, critical linguists have focused on these dimensions of conversation and their role in equity and education.

From the outset, the application of the study of discourse to teaching and learning was colored by concerns about and interest in social norms. By studying discourse we could get a window on what people believe—and how they negotiate, construct, and reconstruct their beliefs. This is at the core of examining differential treatment and access to knowledge and it is also potentially at the core of social change. One exemplar of sociolinguistic research on oral language in a literacy event in a diverse primary classroom was conducted by Sarah Michaels (1981) and illustrates this convergence.

EXEMPLAR 1: "SHARING TIME" RESEARCH BY MICHAELS

In this research, close study of the conversation of teacher and pupils in a primary classroom's "sharing time" uncovered some troubling patterns. The teacher's schema for an appropriate oral sharing was brief and topic-centered—a spoken paragraph. Some children, mainly from middle-class backgrounds and European American speech communities knew that this was the appropriate way to share in school—even without having to be told by the teacher. They were making manifest in their talk not only the information they had to share but also a great deal about their social standing.

Students who did not already know or who for other reasons did not produce the school-appropriate sharing talk tended to tell longer, more complex, and thematically linked stories. These would be appropriate in nonschool contexts and perhaps in particular speech communities. However, in this context, they were inappropriate. The teacher did not explicitly address their structure with an explanation of rules for talk, but she did offer them different kinds of responses—less topically relevant and more related to the structure of their narratives. The public, evaluative nature of this kind of classroom conversation produces not only differential access to knowledge but also different available personae to participants. The less school-appropriate narratives were offered most often by lower-income pupils of color. These narratives might well be assessed as showing lack of readiness for school literacy work, especially writing, and also as less mature participation.

Because talk is permeable and improvised and is related to the shifting landscape of identity and activity, participants have options in how they will participate—and some of these options are influenced by their participation in discourse communities, including families, ethnic communities, gendered groups, and occupations. Idealized views of conversation, particularly when applied to communication in educational activities, are limited because they imply a closed system with few options—initiation, reply, evaluation.

Cazden (1988) notes that while this system may well be the "default" mode in Euro-American education, it is not universal and, moreover, it can be altered by explicit effort. Burbules (1993) offers two ways of thinking about such alteration in democratic classrooms: (1) the idea that within even a single conversation, participants may apply diverse conversational "genres" to accomplish the work of reasoning; and (2) the idea that these genres reflect shifting perspectives on "who we are and what we are doing." In some cases, consensus is the aim; in others it is divergence of thinking.

Of research findings such as those of Michaels, Gee (1996) (who has contributed additional analyses of Michaels's data in his own writing about social linguistics) argues that the subtle yet powerful dynamics of sharing time—both as a social event and as an oral preparation for topic-centered writing—illustrates the power of our words to shape both learning and social identity. Further, he argues that these data illustrate the ways that tacitly the wider social context of teacher–student interaction in an activity as apparently simple as sharing time can make a big difference in students' public identities and opportunities to learn, as well as in the recapitulation of social inequality based on race. Vivian Paley in her book, *White Teacher* (2000), analyzed her own practice and made similar findings. Describing the problem she discovered as hers, not that of her pupils, Paley's narrative recounted her efforts to come to terms with her own biases and pay close attention to talk and learning in her classroom as a part of her responsibility as an educator.

In that vein, Gee (1996) not only urges us to analyze classroom talk to understand this problem better but also suggests that when we recognize a situation in education in our society in which some members of a community are harmed or disadvantaged by dominant discourse practices we have a moral and ethnical responsibility to engage in critical discourse analysis to identify the sources of inequality and in reform of practice to redress them.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: AN EXAMINATION OF LANGUAGE AND POWER

Critical linguists are those linguists who wish to analyze texts and conversations for political purposes. Because they argue that language is a central vehicle in the process whereby people are constituted as individuals and as social subjects, and because language and ideology are closely imbricated, the close systematic analysis of the language of texts can expose some of the workings of texts and, by extension, the way that people are oppressed within current social structures. They are attempting to integrate poststructuralist questions of power, truth, and knowledge within their linguistic analytical methods (Mills, 1997). Their definition of discourse draws heavily on the work of French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1926–1984), although they provide a substantial modification of the term because they are concerned with a more ground-level approach to language than Foucault; they thus provide more working models and concrete examples of how texts and conversations work to create inequalities of power and are more concerned with the mechanics of discursive functioning.

Terrain of critical discourse analysts has included an interrogation of the politics of representation and exclusion in the popular media. Fairclough (1989, 1995), for example, examines the media depictions of the actions of prominent politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Kress (2003) discusses the relationship between the proliferation of new media literacies and the confluence of spoken language and textuality in developing a Foucaultian-inspired framework of discourse analysis that could be applied to a conversation among peers or an examination of the nightly news. According to Kress (2003), no text, whether a conversational text or new media text, escapes the shaping influence of discourse (p. 47). Douglas Kellner (1995) examines how media discourses socialize and define identities in ways that both reproduce and resist existing power relations. Kellner's work critically examines the functions and usage of spoken language in films, youth music, and television news and entertainment. His work is not only descriptive but also prescriptive in articulating a method to be used by discerning citizens to make sense of their positioning vis-à-vis dominant media discourses.

The Construction of Knowledge in Discourse

Foucault believed that one of the most productive ways of thinking about discourse is not as a group of signs or a stretch of text but as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak." In this sense, discourse is something which produces something else, rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analyzed in isolation. Foucault (1981) also believed that each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbors and causes to function as true. Truth, therefore, is something societies have to work to produce rather than something that appears in a transcendental way.

Discourses do not exist in a vacuum but are in constant conflict with other discourses and other social practices which inform them over questions of truth and authority. Foucault was not interested in which discourse is a true or accurate representation of the real; rather, he was concerned with the mechanics whereby one becomes produced as the dominant discourse. Foucault argued for the imbrication of power with knowledge, so that all the knowledge that exists is the result or the effect of power struggles. Most theorists of power have seen individuals as either benefited or oppressed by existing power relations, but Foucault saw them as the effects or instances of power relations. This is why Foucault's archaeological analysis of discourse is so important; he was not interested in simply analyzing the discourses that circulate in our society but challenges us to see the arbitrariness of this range of discourses, the strangeness of those discourses, in spite of their familiarity. He also charted the development of certain discursive practices, so that we can see that, rather than being permanent, as their familiarity would suggest, discourses are constantly changing and their origins can be traced to certain key shifts in history.

Talk and Perspective

More recent work in discourse analysis and in critical linguistics has shown that utterances do not simply mean one thing and that they cannot be interpreted from the standpoint of the speaker or hearer alone. Fairclough (1995) assumes that each of the participants will view the functioning of utterances from a standpoint made up of different interests and preoccupations—the analyst has therefore to be careful not to elide his or her position of analysis with that of one of the participants. Critical linguists have therefore been concerned with inflecting Foucault's analysis of discourse with a political concern with the effects of discourse (e.g., the way that people are positioned into roles through discursive structures and the way that certain people's knowledge is disqualified or not taken seriously in contrast to authorized knowledge). It is the shift away from mere description to a more analytical and critical perspective which is a significant reinterpretation of Foucault's work through the matrix of linguistics' concern for replicable, verifiable analyses.

Fairclough believes that Foucault's work is so important to critical linguistics because of his work's emphasis on the major role of discourse in the constitution of social subjects. Fairclough argues that Foucault's work on discourse can be usefully drawn on by linguists for two main insights: (1) the constitutive nature of discourse—discourse constitutes the social, including "objects" and social subjects; and (2) the primacy of interdiscursivity and intertextuality—that discursive practice is defined by its relations with others, and draws on others in complex ways. A concern for the relation between the individual interaction and the wider discursive and social structure not only makes for a form of analysis that is complex and finely nuanced but also makes for an analysis that is self-critical in terms of its own claims to "truth," and is aware of the dangers of naively ascribing meaning to texts. It is this type of fusion of larger social questions with smaller-scale analytical questions which holds the greatest potential for future work in this field.

Michel Pecheux (1982) views a discourse as a particular area of language use identified by the institutions to which it relates and by the positions from which it comes and which it marks for the speaker. The position does not exist by itself, however. Indeed, it may be understood as a standpoint taken up by the discourse through its relation to another, ultimately an opposing, discourse. Most critical approaches consider discourses to be principally organized around practices of exclusion. Pecheux's work on discourse is important in that he tries to analyze the meanings of words and their relations to larger structures without assuming that words and sentences had a meaning in themselves. Pecheux's work is also important in that he stresses more than Foucault the conflictual nature of discourse; that is, it is always in dialogue and conflict with other positions. He stresses the fact that ideological struggle is the essence of discourse structure.

Pecheux is concerned that, for example, people who are not privileged within a class system, through lack of access to education, knowledge, and familiarity with information networks and capital, are similarly prevented from having easy access to discourses. Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity. For Pecheux in particular, discourses do not exist in isolation but are the object and site of struggle. Discourses are thus not fixed but are the site of constant contestation of meaning.

Feminist and postcolonial scholars have drawn on the French discourse analysis of Foucault and Pecheux for overtly political ends. Feminists, for instance, have used discourse analysis to move away from conceptions of women as victims of male domination to examine the ways in which power manifests itself and is resisted in everyday life (Mills, 1997). Postcolonial theorists are able to use discourse analysis to map historical, cultural, and political shifts in relations between subaltern cultures and the West through examination of discursive representations (Loomba, 2001). Similar to the feminists, postcolonial theorists also resist simple characterizations between dominant and subordinate groups and have used discourse analysis not only to characterize contemporary relations but to challenge problematic and disempowering historical narratives.

EXEMPLAR 2:
CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN EDUCATION BY MORRELL

An exemplar of research on literacy education approaching discourse in terms of institutionalized power, inequality, and historical narrative is Morrell's (2002) research on the experience of urban youth learning literacy in high school. Morrell researched integration of study of the high school's literary canon with students' popular culture as a way to tap the competence, motivation, and considerable background knowledge students can bring to literature study when it is linked to salient experiences in their lives outside school.

In his critical research on discourse in literacy education at the high school level, Morrell (2002, 2004) has worked at the borders of discourse communities, tapping expertise in one discourse (that of popular culture among urban youth) not only to master canonical high school curriculum but to enter even more explicitly powerful discourse of political and social activism in one's community. Morrell finds that incorporating study of the discourses of popular culture has two important outcomes for urban students. First, he was able to demonstrate connections between the way students talk about music and film and the ways that students are required to talk about canonical texts such as poems and novels. Students had developed schemas for close textual analysis and critical conversations in one arena that could be tapped into in another arena, namely, school. The second important outcome of the research with discourses of popular culture was that students were able to apply this analytical tool to be more discerning consumers of a set of cultural practices that were simultaneously representative and co-opting (Lipsitz, 1994; Storey, 1998).

Morrell's work is échoed in the ethnographic and sociolinguistic research of Moll (2000), who prepared teachers to become ethnographers in the home communities of their pupils and learn about the "funds of knowledge" within those communities which might be brought into the classroom to embody the school curriculum in the knowledge and practice of important adults in the child's life and mother tongue. Similarly, Gutiérrez, Baquedabi-Lopez, and Tejada (1999) have identified by means of discourse analysis in bilingual classrooms those activity settings in which students are able to bridge home and school and often transcend the norms of either community to forge a powerful linguistic and educational synthesis. Gutiérrez calls these third spaces, and advances both research and recommendations for practice based on her research among youngsters for whom English is a second language.

In all three of these examples, researchers tackle not only discourse analysis in ethnographic perspective but the move toward innovation and intervention as they attempt (or encourage and study) innovative practices that seem to break the frame of our taken for granted assumptions about how language and literacy are constituted within the established institution of U.S. public schooling. Each study also exemplifies the ways that the researchers followed rigors of analysis of discourse in its social and cultural context as part of developing, implementing, and studying innovative curriculum and instruction within the institution of schooling.

To work at this level of depth and sensitivity, a researcher must take pains to collect data among speakers engaged in authentic activities (in addition to other kinds of data based on surveys or tests or analysis of artifacts). He or she must look at social, political, and historical contexts as frames for interpretation. He or she must sample extensively from the speech data available within a particular discourse community or speech event and report analyses both descriptively and analytically, giving evidentiary warrant for the interpretation/descriptions as he or she has written it, and considering both alternate readings of the same data and disconfirming examples. Florio-Ruane (1987, p. 195) summarized the following maxims as important features to include when conducting or assessing research on classroom discourse:

- Go to the people.
- Pay attention to what is said and done.

- Plan your recording carefully.
- Proceed inductively.
- Be alert to interpretation.
- Find locally meaningful units of analysis.
- Balance explanation with narration and verbatim examples.
- Look for disconfirming evidence and discrepant cases.
- Think about your informants.

We judge the adequacy of research on oral discourse by its closeness to speakers, their speech, and the cultural contexts of their social and linguistic activities. Research of this kind is concerned with identification of local meaning in speakers' terms but also with its power. Having done this, many researchers move from descriptive, analytical, and critical studies to innovations aimed at educational improvement.

TALK, POWER, AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Again, we judge analysis of discourse (both defined as extended sequences of talk and as the social process of identification by means of talk) by its closeness to speakers and speech—by its concern for identification of local meaning in speakers' terms but also by its power to see the multiple form/function relationships possible in a language system and the ways that disambiguation of those relationships depends on cultural knowledge—especially that knowledge acquired in use and by participation. Ultimately, we value a study of oral discourse in terms of its pertinence to the educational questions asked. It is especially useful in addressing the following sorts of question in education: What is happening, specifically, in the social action that takes place in this particular setting? What do these actions mean to the actors involved in them, at the moment that they are taking place? How are the happenings organized in patterns of social organization and learned cultural principles for the conduct of everyday life—how, in other words, are people in the immediate setting present to each other as environments for one another's meaningful actions? How is what is happening in this setting as a whole (i.e., the classroom) related to happenings at other system levels outside and inside the setting? How do the ways everyday life is organized in this setting compare to other ways of organizing social life in a wide range of settings and at other times? (Erickson, 1986, p. 121).

From these examples and rigors it should be evident that the study of discourse in education is not a static, decontextualized process. It is a study of people actively engaged in communicating information and also negotiating roles, statuses, and identities. This line of inquiry leads us to look at the social organization of inequality, the ways language is used to sustain particular norms, and the ways metalinguistic awareness can foster critique and reasoning about complexity. Finally, the tool is useful for studying—and designing and assessing transformative discourse situations and practices generative of new possibilities for thought, action, and identification. For these reasons, it is an important tool for research on learning and education.

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