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**A Sociocultural Analysis of Teacher Talk in Inquiry-Based Professional  
Development**

Paper presented at the Sociocultural Perspectives on Teacher Education and  
Development' conference, University of Oxford, 7 – 8 April, 2008

In this paper we examine a teacher-authored narrative in which Mann (2002), an English as a second language teacher, critically reflects on how his teaching beliefs were transformed as a result of participating in Cooperative Development (Edge 1992; 2002); an inquiry-based approach to professional development that promotes *self-development* as it occurs within the context of a supportive group of colleagues. Our analysis of Mann's narrative, based on a Vygotskian sociocultural view of cognitive development, exposes evidence that unexpected aspects of the dialogic process that Mann and his colleagues engaged in actually spurred his development.

Mann's development is traced from the initial gap between his cognition and emotions, manifested in a contradiction between his beliefs and practices, through the dialogic processes of externalization and re-conceptualization, towards a transformation, he asserts, of his teaching practices. By externalizing these contradictions with his colleagues, who act as temporary others, he is in essence operating in a zone of proximal development (ZPD) in which the mediational means provided by the group enable him to re-conceptualize and restructure his beliefs and work towards self-regulation of his teaching practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Inquiry-based professional development is an overarching term for school-based professional development that is practitioner-driven, self-directed, and often collaborative, with the purpose of answering questions posited by teachers themselves, improving practice, and reshaping their understanding of their professional lives. Thus, inquiry-based professional development creates an ideal setting for teacher learning.

Likewise, Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978) is an ideal theoretical lens to see what teacher learning actually looks like (Johnson and Golombek 2003).

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that an individual's higher mental functions are generated through participation in socially meaningful activities that are mediated (organized and controlled) by culturally constructed material and conceptual artifacts, the most prominent being language. Cognitive development proceeds as individuals participate in socially meaningful patterns of activity, at first relying on external material and symbolic artifacts to perform the action. Over time, individuals transform idealized forms of external artifacts into internal representation, eventually integrating them into their thinking, resulting in self-regulation of the action, and development of the higher mental functions. Self-regulation means that individuals no longer need to rely on the external mediational means because those means have become internalized. Self-regulation emerges through the process of internalization / externalization (Valsiner 1998). Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argue that internalization "describes the means of developing the capacity to perform complex cognitive and motor functions with increasingly less reliance on externally provided mediation" (p. 266). Externalization, the reciprocal process, "connotes activities by which the once-social – but now personal – set of meanings is constructively moved into novel contexts within the social environment" (Valsiner 1998, p. 115).

An example of this process is commonly found in novice teachers who initially find it necessary to write detailed, step-by-step lesson plans to assist them in getting through their lessons. Writing lesson plans is itself a historical, cultural practice handed down through the institutional practices of teacher education. A lesson plan is both a

physical and a symbolic tool that externally mediates teaching processes. As teachers gain more experience, what were once externalized social teaching processes become internalized personal processes. Experienced teachers rely less on following a detailed lesson plan as their teaching practices become self-regulated. As a consequence of increased self-regulation, teachers are able to attend less to what they are doing and more to students' needs.

It is important to note that internalization / externalization is not a process of direct knowledge transmission; rather, it is the appropriation of ideas that assimilate with preexisting knowledge to reconstruct understanding. The dialogic process is one of *transformation*, the product of which is applicable to multiple situations and is not a quick fix, patch, or solution to a specific problem. Further more, internalization does not happen on its own, but rather as a product of human agency (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Human agency entails voluntary control over behavior as well as the ability to assign relevance to events and is culturally, socially and historically mediated. The significance of human agency is twofold: first, humans can decide what they want to appropriate and what they want to ignore; second, that what they decide is a product of their history. In other words, internalization and transformation is individual, based on participation in social activities, and gauged by how these social activities manifest in thought. To extend the lesson plan example further, one teacher may find the use of an extensive lesson plan useful even after the teaching processes have been internalized, while another may find this same behavior burdensome, and thus choose a simpler or more open ended lesson plan or no plan at all. In addition, while all novice teachers might initially be object-regulated by lesson plans, their path towards internalization is self-directed and

unique. With this theoretical framework in mind, it is possible to explore teacher learning through the lens of sociocultural theory in the context of inquiry-based professional development.

### **Cooperative Development**

Cooperative Development an inquiry-based approach to professional development designed by Edge (2002), creates a deliberate and carefully regulated mediational space for a teacher (Speaker) to articulate something that is “tentative, troubling, incomplete, partial, or emergent” (Mann 2002, p. 195) with a colleague (Understander) who through the nature of his/her talk creates as much ‘space’ as possible for the Speaker to articulate his/her thoughts, ideas, concerns. The purpose of Cooperative Development is for the Speaker to set a goal and to take action to achieve it. To accomplish this, the Speaker must focus on an area of action, thus providing a purpose for the interaction, while the Understander, through the use of non-evaluative, non-judgmental speech, performs a series of specifically designed moves to assist the Speaker in making creative use of the space provided.

For the Understander to be non-judgmental, he or she must express, in Edge’s redefinition of the terms, *respect*, *empathy* and *sincerity* towards the Speaker. That is to say, the Understander sets aside his or her own previous knowledge and opinions and neither offers guidance from experience nor agreement with what the Speaker says but instead, *respects* the Speaker. Using Edge’s definition of *empathy*, the Understander tries to understand what the Speaker is saying and asks more questions to articulate those ideas as clearly as possible. Finally, the Understander must be *sincere* in the sense that the

Speaker believes the Understander genuinely wants to fully comprehend the Speaker's ideas.

The Understander must also use a set of carefully crafted "moves" to facilitate the talk. These moves can be employed at any point in the session and include *reflecting*, *thematizing*, *challenging*, and *focusing*. In the first move, *reflecting*, the Understander acts as a mirror, literally reflecting the ideas of the Speaker back so that the Speaker can hear his or her own ideas more clearly. Reflection can take the form of a comprehension check since what was understood may not actually be what the Speaker intended. If so, the Speaker then has a chance to rephrase and disambiguate his or her thoughts. However, the Understander's interpretation may in fact be what the Speaker intended, which will lead to one of two outcomes. First, it may either encourage progress in the sense that the Understander has listened attentively and is showing empathy towards the Speaker's ideas thus giving the Speaker confidence to take more risks and be more expressive about his or her thoughts. Alternatively, it may facilitate insight as what was reflected by the Understander, while being very much the Speaker's ideas, is not agreeable, and thus an area on which the Speaker may need to focus.

During this interaction the Speaker may mention several points. If the Understander sees a connection between two or more points, he or she may shift to the second move, *thematizing*. The Understander may suggest a connection between these points but leaves it to the Speaker to evaluate any connection as either acceptable or to discard it. *Thematizing* serves the purpose of enabling the Speaker to see connections and/or distinctions that he/she may not have been aware of previously.

Similarly, the challenging move involves connecting two or more of the Speaker's ideas that the Understander cannot reconcile. Should the Speaker affirm two or more ideas that the Understander sees as contradictory, then the Understander asks the Speaker to explain any possible connections. Edge explains that an essential element of the *challenging* move is that the Understander should not be attempting to prove a point but rather to truly grasp how the two ideas coincide in the Speaker's mind. This too, indicates to the Speakers the Understander's sense of empathy as Edge defines it.

While it is the job of the Understander to facilitate this dialogic interaction, the Speaker determines the topic and direction. This agency on the part of the Speaker is crucial. Indeed, while the Understander has several moves he or she may take to facilitate the discourse, the role of the Understander is that of an "other" or tool, used by the Speaker to better articulate his/her ideas. The result is not a conversation but rather a highly controlled dialogue in which the Speaker reaches a deeper understanding of his or her own ideas and ultimately come to some sort of tentative solution or plan of action.

### **Teacher Talk in Cooperative Development**

Steve Mann (2002) retrospectively narrates the experience of participating in a year-long Cooperative Development group in which the participants audio recorded the talk that emerged when pairs (Speaker/Understander) engaged in *reflecting*, *focusing*, and *thematizing* moves. In addition, the group held follow-up sessions in which they used critical extracts recorded from their initial session to assess the nature and value of the moves that were made by the Understander. Steve describes his experience as "talking my way into understanding" (p. 198) and goes on to demonstrate how both sessions

(initial and follow-up) “provided time and space for articulation” and that “other individuals in the group helped me articulate my experience in ways that would not be available in other kinds of meeting and teacher talk” (p. 198). In what follows, we examine the nature of teacher talk that emerged in these exchanges and trace how they created a mediational space in which Steve was able to reconceptualize his understanding of the nature of *lesson planning* and *pastoral care* in his teaching.

### **Planning Beliefs and Practices Analysis**

In one session, Steve describes his unease with the way in which he thinks about and engages in lesson planning. During the *reflecting* move, he expresses concern over the gap between his ‘planning beliefs’ and his ‘planning practices’.

#### *Excerpt 1*

Steve: As soon as I enter into a planning world (.) in terms of talking (0.4) it seems to cause some kind of stress,

Nick: Mmm

Steve: which I- which I feel imposing on me. and this imposition, (.) this structure that I’ve preplanned, (0.4) I find is- is a saddle (.) a chain (.) something which inhibits me. (p. 199)

This gap, between his cognition and emotions, becomes the impetus for change and it is through extended dialogic interaction between Speaker and Understanders that he comes to the realization that, for him, there is a distinction between *being prepared* and *being planned*. In Excerpt 2, he describes how interactions with the Understanders (Ellie & Helen) enable him to articulate how planning makes him less responsive as a teacher.

#### *Excerpt 2*

Ellie: You feel that- do you feel that you’ve had some sort of signals and being unable to change your response to it?

Steve: I think it’s partly that and partly the fact that I don’t feel open to any signals =



Ellie: =So you don't feel you see them

Steve: .hhh (0.6) I see the two things in opposition >you know< this driving force to get through this plan (0.4) does mean that perhaps I don't even see the signals

Helen: So, its as if you're looking back into your head all the time rather than looking out and communicating with (p. 2000)

Steve's intuitive sense that lesson planning is essential, is grounded, no doubt, in the institutional expectations of his pre-service teacher training program in which as a novice he was socialized into feeling he must account for everything that he will do in the form of detailed lesson plans. In one sense, engaging in lesson planning mediates the actions of the teacher and, at least on paper, demonstrates to others and to the teacher that he/she 'knows what he/she is doing'. Yet, these deeply engrained planning beliefs contradict Steve's current teaching practices as he describes his teaching as more successful when he doesn't plan as much. This issue resurfaces in a later interaction when he realizes that the stress he feels about planning comes from some external pressure to feel like you "know what you are doing." This realization, made public by externalizing his conception of planning, enables him to begin to articulate a distinction between *being prepared* and *being planned*.

### *Excerpt 3*

Nick: And that's the big distinction I hear now in what you're saying (.) between being prepared to enter the arena (.) and the idea of having a plan which you think will ride roughshod over the various possibilities that could have occurred in that arena.

Steve: Yes, yes (.) and another thought hits me from that, (.) from the preparation planning distinction... (p. 202)

In summarizing what he learned from participating in the process of Cooperative Development, Steve says: "this process helped me to articulate something that I think has been an important part of my teaching since the mid-eighties. However, I had not been able to fully form or 'justify' this position. The session helped me to do that" (p.

202). At this point in the narrative, we are able to see an emerging re-articulation of how Steve is beginning to conceptualize teaching, in particular the distinction between *being prepared* and *being planned*. Yet without evidence of how this plays out in Steve's actual planning and instructional activities, we can only describe this point as his development as an idealized conception of teaching with a commitment to action, rather than evidence of internalization.

Interestingly, Steve's claims that successful Understander moves involve offering comments that do not evaluate or suggest anything new and require that Speaker and Understander are on the same 'wavelength'. Yet, the moves that he describes as unacceptable actually appear to have a greater influence on his thinking and his ability to articulate the distinction between *being prepared* and *being planned* than those moves he describes as acceptable. For example, in Excerpt 4, Robert "touches a nerve" in one statement that he makes about "not knowing where to go" in a lesson.

*Excerpt 4*

Robert: Is it the case that you don't know where to go until someone has made a contribution?

Steve: I think there are plenty of places I could go, (.) I'm not talking about knowing nothing about the area you've allotted to talk about. I'm not talking about no preparation, (.) no reading no thinking around the area... (p. 201)

While Steve suggests that he is somewhat put off by the evaluative nature of Robert's comment, "you don't know", he does admit that this move "helps me to further my emerging distinction between prepared and planned" (p. 202). Thus, the strict nature of the rules that define this mediational space may, in fact, inhibit constructive critiques that might push a Speaker to move beyond his/her current thinking toward alternative ways of understanding oneself and one's teaching.

## Pastoral Care Analysis

In another session, Steve articulates his dissatisfaction with the way he conceptualizes and implements his responsibility for ‘pastoral care’ with the students.

His current conceptualization of pastoral care is that it looks:

after the whole person as well as his or her ‘academic progress’. We are concerned with personal, financial, and social well-being, particularly when those aspects of students’ lives affect their progress in courses and programmes (p. 202).

However, Steve admits that he is “still trying to formulate the nature of the role” (p. 202), and worries that any changes he proposes for guiding tutorials “would have specific outcomes for the rest of the group” (p. 204), and this frustrates him.

During a *reflecting* move, the Understander tries to comprehend the source of the frustration Steve feels. In Excerpt 5, Steve realizes that his frustration arises from the gap between wanting to pay more attention to how he conceptualizes pastoral care and implements changes, and not being able to find the time to do so.

### *Excerpt 5*

Nick: When you were talking about that earlier (.) was there frustration that – either that we’re not doing these things or it isn’t happening (.) you were talking about > you know < I can’t tell you what to do but on the other hand if they don’t do it we can’t talk about it and–

Steve: I think there’s a frustration (.) but errm it’s not with the group (.) I mean it honestly isn’t with the group (.) it’s with the nature of our jobs of what we have to do (.) that we don’t we have that time (.) I mean it’s that dilemma that I’ve tried to talk about before that (1.2) in some ways (.) maybe I need to take more responsibility of trying to carve out more time (.) (p. 204)

This gap between his cognition (how he currently approaches pastoral care in tutorials) and emotion (dissatisfaction with his approach and frustration at not finding time to change his conception) drives Steve to “carve out time for this priority” (p. 204)

and seek change in his conceptualization of pastoral care and its implementation in how he conducts tutorials.

Further dialogic interaction with the Understanders reveals how his conceptualization of pastoral care begins to evolve. In Excerpt 6, the Understander rephrases what he thinks Steve means by pastoral care, and Steve confirms this interpretation by externalizing the connection he feels between pastoral care and interaction.

*Excerpt 6*

Sam: Okay erm so pastoral care but specifically interaction is the sort of thing you want to bring together (.) that's what you want to [explore?

Steve: [Yeah erm  
and when you say that I wonder if there is actually anything else (.) is there anything else in the field of pastoral care which isn't interaction in some way. (p. 203)

Later on, the Understander leads Steve to question his conceptualization of pastoral care as a 'system', and assists him in "pinning down just how *interaction* is integral to pastoral care in a way that a *system* is not" (author's italics, p. 203).

*Excerpt 7*

Sam: So it's not (2.2) is that a change? Have you just changed what you mean by interaction?

Steve: No I think what I've done is I've realised that when I talk about pastoral care (.) it's one of those words which (.) which I've been living with for a long time erm I did a PGCE at Warwick and my option was on pastoral care

Sam: Mmm

Steve: That was in a state school setting and it was very much a new subject then (.) it was very – almost trendy new thing pastoral care (.) and I've always thought of it as a system and now I'm thinking of it more as interaction and I think it's a difference in emphasis (p. 203)

Another *reflecting* move shows how Steve's thinking about pastoral care has begun to evolve. The Understander's rephrasing in Excerpt 8 helps Steve to "shape a very useful distinction" between being interactive and being proactive (p. 205).

*Excerpt 8*

Robert: Have you moved over the last half hour? (.) a little bit (.) from the purely interactive to the more proactive? (3.6)

Steve: Yes I think so (.) I think that's true (p. 205)

Finally, Excerpt 9 shows the *reflecting* move that offers evidence of Steve's reconceptualization of pastoral care as a reactive, proactive and interactive process.

*Excerpt 9*

Robert: Does that mean a dual relationship of the pro and inter (5.2)

Steve: Yeah (.) I like that distinction (.) we have reactive, proactive, and interactive=

Robert: =Reactive being the fire-fighting? =

Steve: =Yeah (p. 205)

According to Steve, this distinction "has proved to be very useful...in the way I now conceptualise the role I have and the work I do with other tutors in the promotion and enhancement of pastoral care" (p. 206).

As we found in our earlier analysis on lesson planning, Steve once again describes a particular move as unsuccessful (Excerpt 10) when he states that the Understander (Robert) has "not so much helped me to make a distinction as supplied me with one of his own" (p. 205), arguing that Robert's comments, and his own lack of response, suggest "there is too much interpretation" (p. 205).

*Excerpt 10*

Robert: I'm now getting a dual picture of pastoral care (.) one is something initiative taking (.) you have to care to do certain things. Right? (.) another is the more passive participation where pastoral care is the care that I feel more than the care that I do (.) right you talk about – I have understood you talk about the negative thing (.) the thing that I do. Should I do, should I say these things? (.) in other

words a plan of campaign or a strategy for how you go about it (0.6) and the other is that it is happening while you're doing it. Is it both of these together? (4.2)

Robert: Or is neither of them? Have I got it wrong

Steve: I think it's an interesting distinction (.) the distinction between the pastoral you feel and the pastoral you do (5.2) errm my gut feeling is that you – we in the pressure we're under (.) cannot sustain the pastoral care element always

Steve argues that although this move does not help him move on, the next Understander moves “*do help me to work through another distinction that enables me to draw out threads of my articulation...*” (author's italics, p. 205). Steve claims the Understander move in Excerpt 10 was unsuccessful, yet it appears that Robert could not have articulated his next move without not first externalizing his interpretation of what he believed Steve had said. In other words if the Understander here followed the strict rules of Cooperative Development and refrained from making comments that helped *his* thinking about the Speaker's topic, their dialogic interaction might not have continued on to a move that Steve found constructive.

Overall, Steve is motivated to reconceptualize pastoral care not only because of the underlying cognitive dissonance arising from his dissatisfaction at how he approached pastoral care in his tutorials and frustration at not having adequate time to develop this concept further (Excerpt 4), but also because of the contradiction he felt between the pastoral care expert knowledge he gained during his Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) (Excerpt 5), and his on-going attempt to “formulate the nature of the role” for his tutorials (p. 202). Moreover, the activity of engaging in Cooperative Development created a mediational space that allowed Steve to function in a ZPD where the Understanders, acting as temporary others, assist him in externalizing what he thinks about pastoral care, and through the nature of their moves drive him towards reconceptualizing his understanding of pastoral care. However, beyond Steve's claim

that his reconceptualization of pastoral care has been useful in changing his practice, there is no evidence in his narrative of internalization. To know this, we would need evidence of the nature of his activity, that is, how he interacts with students in tutorials before and after the pastoral care session to ascertain if he has fully internalized this alternative conceptualization of pastoral care. Again, at this point, his development can only be described as an idealized conception of practice with a commitment to action.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, Cooperative Development creates a unique kind of mediational space and a unique kind of discourse within which self-exploration, articulation, and the re-articulation of ideas can emerge. An innovative feature of this approach is that it deliberately alters the ways in which teachers interact with one another when they talk about their teaching. Cognizant of the negative effects that the typical ‘teacher’s room talk’ has on teachers’ professional growth, where evaluative comments and judgmental exchanges force teachers to position themselves as ‘knowing what they are doing’, Cooperative Development allows teachers to talk their way into new understandings and new ways of thinking about and engaging in their teaching.

While Mann argues the Cooperative Development group’s strict adherence to non-evaluative language was what pushed his development, our analysis found that the processes of externalization and internalization were actually driven by language that Mann called “unacceptable moves” by the Understander. We argue that some unexpected evaluative Understander comments actually functioned as mediational means that pushed

the Speaker's conceptual development, advancing him further along the ZPD towards a resolution of the contradictions and self-regulation.

An analysis of Mann's narrative provides evidence that participating in inquiry-based approaches such as Cooperative Development can lead to changes in teachers' beliefs and practices, and supports the wider claim that the mediational space and dialogic processes that inquiry-based approaches create are effective in promoting teacher learning.



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