Dramaturgical Representations of Social Drama in Educational Settings: Opening a New Dimension in Positioning Analysis

Robert Roe
University of Melbourne
robroe@optusnet.com.au

Abstract

The dilemma inherent in being a teacher-researcher is that I want my research to contribute to both scholarship and school practices. If I choose to present my findings in the form of narrative stories, Connelly & Clandinin, practitioners would benefit. Choosing positioning theory, Linehan and McCarthy, teacher educators would engage. I need a presentation format that would resonate with the day-to-day drama of teaching and offer insightful analysis of the interplay between the ‘speaking and acting’ of individuals in a local community of practice and a particular institutional setting. I make the assumption, like Goffman, that social acts are staged, and that ‘theatre’ and ‘drama’ are metaphors for social life. A dramaturgical account rendered as a drama-text highlights the daily activities of teachers, such that a new perspective is afforded the reader: one of transformation of identity and of institutional re-structuring. In this paper I sketch the construction of a dramaturgical representation as an ‘imagined’ drama. We will discuss the key features of the imagined drama: structure; creating and juxtaposing verbatim dialogue; the narrator; positioning analysis. So join me in the realm of possibility in which dramaturgical representations open a new dimension in positioning analysis in stitching together the various ‘strips of social behaviour’ to form a larger strip of social life.

Key words: discourse, dramaturgical representation, moral orders, positioning.
Constructing Dramaturgical Representations of the Social Life of Teachers within a Community of Practice

In this paper I will sketch a solution to the problem I encountered when conducting longitudinal studies of institutional transformation involving multiple actors, namely, how are the accounts of teacher enthusiasts presented as rich dialogue to be incorporated into a process ontology of teacher agency that includes fine grained practice?

The study

In 1996, the innovative decision of a small private school requiring all year nine students to use Notebook computers in 1998 framed my 1997 longitudinal study exploring the site-based ontologies of teachers. A Private School on a Mission, the transformational account, presented as a two-act (16 scenes), dialectical drama, emerged from the verbatim recollections of the lived experience of eight participating teachers.

The extracts which follow are taken from a larger study (Roe, 2015) of the early socialization of networked technologies in Melbourne schools. The doctoral study involved conversational interviews of teachers pioneering the use of new media over a three year period.

Extract 1

Act One - The Actors as Role-bearers and Position-takers

Scene One: Kim Director of Computing
Scene Two: Jessie Chair of the Curriculum Technologies Forum

[...]

Act Two - The Actors in Conversation

Scene One: “But They’ll Spend 40 Hours”
Scene Two: “So I Was Talking To People Below 10 Hours”

[...]
Why a dramaturgical representation?

I felt that for my purposes the conversation ‘turn-taking’ style transcript format (Linehan, C. and McCarthy, J, 2000; Harré, R., Moghaddam, F., Palmerton Cairnie, T., Rothbart, D. and Sabat, S, 2009) while affording a controlled analytical space, lacked a sense of the dynamic interaction between teachers or failed to engender a sense of the structure of feeling (Williams, 1977) of the researched moment, or explicitly facilitate the reader’s entry into conversations or the tracking of complex, multiple contemporaneous storylines.

For this purpose, I constructed the dramaturgical accounts in the style of an ‘imagined drama’ which is a drama suited primarily for reading rather than production. In constructing the text of the imagined drama I drew on techniques of dramatic structure (Goffman, 1959; Burke, 1969), the documentary style of verbatim theatre (Wilkinson, 2008), to capture and make use of the precise words spoken by the teachers in the accounts, and the dialectical staging and performing approach of Bertolt Brecht (1964), to provide a dramaturgical frame for presenting and analysing verbatim dialogues.

Extract 2

Act One - The Actors as Role-bearers and Position-takers

**Narrator:** Pat, the Deputy Headmaster welcomes you as you enter the foyer of the school, and offers to take you to the staff lounge. Upon entering the lounge, you are introduced to a group of teachers. … The staff in turn, introduce themselves: beginning with their role and then talking about the issues that are important to them in their quest to use or persuade others to use new media in their pedagogical practice.

Act One Scene One - Kim - Director of Computing

**Kim:** I’m the Director of Computing. The Systems Manager with overall responsibility for the administration of the senior and junior campus network. … For me, it has been … the right staff. The right time. The Head … and putting the Notebook in the hands of staff.

[...]
In the imagined drama the storylines of teacher’s positioning and repositioning are rendered as co-constructed dramaturgical accounts as verbatim drama in which the researcher is represented as the narrator. Acting as guide the narrator ‘prepositions’ the experienced reader for entry into each scene so as to easily understand the nature of the conversation that is taking place. In this space it is assumed the reader will consciously or unconsciously, actively construct a narrative of the drama from his or her perspective.

In the course of this construction uncertainty and ambiguity may emerge concerning the narrator’s ‘Ethogenic Interpretation’ of the positioning and repositioning of the actors, who are treated as more than characters, but less than types in the institutional histories, and the researcher’s selection and juxtapositioning of the dialogue.

**Extract 3**

Act Two Scene One - “But They’ll All Spend 40 Hours”

**Narrator**

The following exchange between Kim, Dale, Sandy, Pat and Sam takes place in Sandy’s (Director of Curriculum) office after reflecting on the question: Does your rhetoric match your practice?

**Kim** (Director of Computing): Except for the Headmaster, all staff at Cyber Grammar School are expected to undertake 40 hours computer-based professional development.

**Pat** (recently appointed Deputy Headmaster): The Junior School teachers are also involved in this program. They have also been provided with Notebooks.

[...]

**Ethogenic Interpretation**

Mandates create conditions of compliance and/or resistance. Under mandatory conditions, personal action is interpreted within the local moral order as either
compliant or resistive. ‘Attendance’ signals ‘compliance’ while ‘non-attendance’ infers ‘resistance’.

[...] 

The reader (practitioner, scholar) should have the impression that the actors including the narrator are talking to him or her, that he or she is also a participant in the social drama capable of reflective and reflexive action, and is not merely a passive disinterested reader.

Finally, I needed to solve the problem of moving between being positioned as an actor/narrator in the imagined drama and being repositioned as the researcher providing commentary/analysis of the chapter representing a transformational narrative.

**Extract 4**

Reviewing the Chapter 5 Conversations in the Context of the Thesis Argument: A Private School on a Mission

Reconnecting to the key arguments in the thesis, in this rendering of the conversations in Chapter 5 show the teachers in the act of re-constructing the contours and layout of their existence as teachers, beyond thinking and knowing, they are constitutive of teachers struggling with their ethical authenticity in agentive spaces endorsed or otherwise in changing institutional orders of practice and honour.

[...] 

**Conclusion**

In constructing the imagined drama as a dramaturgical representation of particular social episodes, the action is conveyed through the dialectic verbatim-dialogue of the actors that simultaneously preserves the inconsistencies in the actions and character of the actual teacher-agents. Such inconsistencies, imperfections, and ambiguities are germane to personal biographies and institutional histories, afford the colour, texture and roughness that is emblematic of the messiness of life.
References


