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Exploring ‘voices’: a methodological reflection on how to enrich the AT approach to the study of inter-professional collaboration

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**Introduction**

In this presentation, I would like to share with you the main methodological issues involved in my investigation of inter-professional practice. My research consists of an extensive ethnographic study within a recently created children’s centre – to which I gave the pseudonym of ‘Ironstone North’ – in Forge Valley, an urban metropolitan authority in central England. In particular, my analysis is focused on the meaning making process and the discursive negotiation of different professional accounts in multi-agency meetings in which a child/family’s case is discussed. The aim of my talk is on the one hand to present a methodological reflection on how to explore the multi-voicedness/multi-dimensionality of inter-professional work in welfare services, and on the other hand to provoke a discussion on the possibilities as well as on the limitations that the AT framework offers and how it can be further enriched.

Drawing from the theoretical reflection offered by Daniels (2006), on the under-theorised problem of social-positioning in AT, I will propose an analytic move on the ways in which the concept of voice can shed light on the interplay between institutional categories and situated discourses in multi-professional work. Among the ontological and epistemological assumptions that have helped me to orient myself in the complex field of inter-professional work, there is the recognition of the contested and mediated nature of the relationship between research, practice, and policy. In my view, as I will explain, ethnography and LE are analytical tools that can help the exploration of the interplay between different discourses involved in the process of recontextualisation of the policy mandate.

**Applying the AT approach to the study of inter-professional work**

I have referred to Engeström’s (1999) five principles, as illustrated by Daniels (2001), in order to discuss their relevance in relationship to the analysis of multi-professional context. I will also use the traditional representation of the activity system as conceptualised in the second and third generations of AT to depict what elements can be enriched through Linguistic Ethnography.

The first key principle is represented by the *unit of analysis*, which is an artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in relation to other activity systems. The activity system is conceptualised as a community that develops a specific micro-culture characterised by *multivoicedness*. Each practitioner participates in the activity with different professional perspectives and linguistic repertoires. In this sense, subjects that participate in a community should be not conceptualised as a homogeneous group whose members share values, motives and resources but as a social movement comprising a shifting range of priorities, languages and practice codes that may contradict one another. The activity system itself carries multiple layers of history, embodied in different artifacts, rules and conventions. The division of labour also creates different positions for the professionals.
involved in the community, who employ symbolic (the discourse) and material (e.g., the Common Assessment Framework) tools to mediate their activities and negotiate new goals.

The third key-principle is the concept of *historicity*: where an activity system takes shape and is transformed over time. Its history needs to be studied not only as local history of evolving activities and objects, but also as history of the theoretical ideas and tools that have shaped their activities. Contradictions then have a central role as a source of change and development. They are conceptualised as structural tensions within and between activity systems, that arise when responsibilities, tasks and goals are redefined and redistributed between changing organisations and institutions (e.g. across a local authority). The capacity of participants in an activity to interpret and expand the object of activity is defined as *expansive transformation* (Engeström, 2001). This involves a reconceptualisation of existing tools, meanings and possibilities for learning, in creating new knowledge and new practice.

In particular, the Activity Theory perspective offers two powerful concepts that can help to explore inter-professional work: co-configuration and boundary-crossing (Engeström, 2005; 2007). The former is a form of work emerging from complex multi-professional settings in children’s services. It implies a collaborative and discursive construction of tasks, solutions and visions. The latter refers to constructive forms of rule-bending in a team of different professionals. New expertise is developed when practitioners collaborate across the different sectors by transforming tools and ways of working together.

The described perspective is helpful in identifying the ways in which the artifacts of an activity system become tools of mediation that shape practices and processes. Particular emphasis is placed on the historicity of the community as the dominant aspect of social and cultural organisation that has been established and transformed over time in a specific set of relations in which the practitioner’s participation is immersed. In my view, this sense of historicity needs to be re-conceptualised when the policy mandates and the normative practice are restructured in a new system. This is particularly significant in researching new practices that involve different professionals working together. As a result of this, more developed theoretical and methodological tools to describe, interpret, and evaluate the complexity of the practice and the shifting relation between activity, subject-positioning and discourse are needed.

The Activity Theory approach provides a possible theoretical and analytical framework as means to interpret the ways in which organisational and professional learning can evolve in a system that comprises tensions and powerful relationships between professionals, local authorities and clients (Edwards et al. 2009). In this perspective, the development of innovative practices is fostered by the creation of tools that could help the process of re-configuration of professional expertise and institutional roles such as boundary-crossing and rule-bending. The Socio-cultural approach offers also a powerful account of both construction and maintenance of a shared object of activity through the creation of new tools and the use of shared resources to expand, negotiate, and shape the collaborative task. However, the analysis of a changing system as conceptualised in the Socio-Cultural Approach limits the complexity of the process of meaning making since it focuses on the division of labour and the symbolic (or material) artifacts specific to different professional categories. Less importance is given to the tensions between the situated practice of
collaboration and the institutional discourse that constrains the professional activities. In addition to this, there is lack of methodological focus on the struggle between different discourses and different voices within a joint activity. However, a recent attempt to expand the rather fixed conceptualisation of the elements that compose the activity system, is represented by the study of interactional dynamics and social positions in discursive practice within a Socio-Cultural approach (Hjörne and Säljö 2004; Mäkitalo and Säljö 2002).

A way of further enriching the methodological tools offered by the Socio-cultural framework can be to focus on a deeper exploration of the relationship between micro-contexts in which the policy is ‘entextualised’ (Blommaert 2005) within the wider institutional context. This will entail not only a vivid description of the implementation of collaborative practices but also an inner and deeper interpretation of the ways in which meanings, actions, and discourse combine to define the particular roles and rules in which that culture is inscribed.

Moreover, the identification of divergent cultural models and social positioning cannot be separated from a closer investigation of the type of discourse that underlie them, since different professionals will possess and use a different professional talk (and text), which will have identifiable linguistic features (Sarangi and Roberts 1999). Any investigation of collaborative practice therefore involves an ethnographic move between interactional and institutional features in order to depict the construction, negotiation and contestation of professional categories and attributes. As Mäkitalo (2003) points out, categorisation in institutions not only affects the everyday management of professional practice but also pinpoints a wider context of historically and politically generated institutional procedures and evaluative processes.

A way of enriching the AT approach to the study of inter-professional work: Linguistic Ethnography

Linguistic Ethnography (Blommaert 2005; Rampton et al. 2004) can be a suitable methodological tool to investigate inter-professional work because it allows the exploration of the interplay between the complexity of policy implementation and the different professional discourses encapsulated in talk and practice. In this sense, it represents a point of convergence of my interest in the situated culture of a children’s centre, my engagement with the problem of the representation of voices, and the intention of not only describing, but also attempting to interpret, the different variations of welfare practice.

The point of departure in both my theoretical and methodological orientations has been the idea of voice as the formal representation of more implicit forms of cultural agency. In a linguistic anthropological perspective (Hymes 1996), the concept of voice is defined as constrained by particular cultural codes that will determine the kind of performances and genres in which that voice will attempt to be heard or impose itself. Translating the metaphor into the policy and multi-professional context of my research, the performances and the genres can be seen as the deployment of professionally organised narrative patterns that can represent, or misrepresent, particular voices, dependent on whether or not they fit into specific codes of behaviour and language. In this sense, norms are encoded in social (and professional) configurations that are reflected in language codes and styles of performance. Ethnography, therefore, is adopted as
both descriptive theory and an interpretative perspective with a specific focus on language as culturally embedded practice, which helps to conceptualise, describe and interpret language and practice as specific communicative resources that are organised in repertoires and performed in genres.

In order to shed light on the contextual factors that frame inter-professional work, I have turned to the notion of ‘discourse’ as a semiotic and meditational web in which dispositions, identities and practice shape, and are shaped by, the social and institutional contexts in which they occur (Hasan 2002; Bernstein 1990). My key point of departure is the conceptualisation of discourse as ‘language in action’ (Blommaert 2005: 2), which ‘comprises all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural, and historical patterns and development of use’ (ibidem: 3). In this sense, my initial interest in investigating the role of discourse within inter-professional collaboration was prompted by the need to combine a close focus on the patterns of micro-interactions, in which the practice of the children’s centre unfolds, with a wider analysis of the macro-features that frame the context: from the organisational structure of the children’s centre itself, through the demands of the Local Authority, to the external policy mandates.

In epistemological terms Linguistic Ethnography (LE) maintains that ‘language and social life are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of situated language use can provide [...] insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity’ (Rampton et al. 2004: 2). More specifically, the three empirical foci that LE intends to explore are individuals, situated encounters and institutions, and networks and communities of practice. In the first of these, individuals are considered in terms of their semiotic repertoires, use of resources, habitual practices and dispositions. In situated encounters events, genres and types of activity in which the subjects interact are the subject of attention. Material settings and physical arrangements are also taken into account, as well as the negotiation process in which subjects engage to understand or influence each other. Finally, how institutions shape, sustain and get reproduced through texts, genres and practices are considered through the prism of institutions, networks, and Communities of Practice.

In this sense, LE approach then provides a descriptive and analytic orientation to address the relationship between structure, practice and agency. This offers a powerful tool in the exploration of the interplay between the voices of the professionals involved in the children’s centre, the situated practice that they create in shared activities (e.g., Common Assessment Framework or Team Around the Child meetings), and the institutions to which they relate (e.g., schools linked to the children’s centre, the Local Authority).

The concept of ‘genre’

The concept of genre represents the analytical link between situated events and social structures, and between individual differences and institutional patterns. Despite the situated nature and the individual variability of a communicative act, the genre still follows relatively stable forms of communication and structure (Bakhtin 1986). In other words, the genre creates a set of conventionalised expectations that members of a social group or network use to
construct and shape the communicative activity that they are involved in (Bauman 1986; Bakhtin 1986). These expectations also give a sense of the specific elements that are constitutive of that activity, such as possible tasks, roles, relationships, ways of carrying out the activity and ways of using resources. The concept can be used as a methodological tool to analyse specific instances of communication in the process of sharing information and constructing meanings within an inter-professional community.

In particular, the twofold quality of the ‘genre’ concept, both descriptive and interpretative, can guide the analysis through the set of different formal and informal types of collaborative arrangements employed by an inter-professional team, because it can help to distinguish different communicative events (official meetings, telephone conversations, correspondence) in terms of type, purpose and relation to the context.

Following Bakthin’s notion of genre, it can be seen as belonging to particular communities: among medical doctors the doctor-patient interview will be the common genre. Likewise, in a children’s centre context, sessions with parents, subgroup meetings, staff meetings and telephone conversations with professionals from other agencies, will be part of that genre repertoire. The process of socialisation is also a matter of acquiring the specific patterns that are required by a genre. Specifically, in the context of a child’s case review, a family support worker needs to be able to recognise and become familiar with the specific genre related to how to assess the family’s needs, which perspective to be held during the meeting with the rest of the team, what kind of activities to be put in the plan, etc. This, in turn, will help the family support worker to establish his/her credibility as being a professional working in that specific children’s centre within that specific Local Authority.

In order to analyse the data, transcriptions from the participant’s interviews and the actual interactions within staff and partnership board meetings can be considered through the specific features that the genre entails. These are: the function of a genre (to persuade, demonstrate, describe a personal point of view on the object of analysis), its specific structure (e.g. a narrative would entail an opening, a storyline and a coda), and its linguistic patterns (use of passive form, personal or impersonal expressions, complexity of syntax, and use of specific terminology).

On the same level of analysis, the function of a genre can be connected to a particular social domain, that is; how genres organise specific parts of communication according to well-established social contexts. For example, analysing to what extent a report compiled by a maternity support worker, after visiting a family, fits in the institutional genre can offer new insights into the recontextualisation process. In fact, it can help the recognition of the interplay between a standardised institutional practice (e.g. a Common Assessment Framework form to assess a child’s case) and the professional’s position, in terms of agency and role. In this sense, it is crucial for the analysis to focus on the recognition of the organised and patterned forms that an inter-professional team uses, as both language and semiotical means, when discussing a child’s case during a review meeting. The communicative forms that belong to that specific professional register may reveal: a particular professional identity, a particular epistemic orientation, a particular mutual position between the participants of the meeting.

On an interpretative level, these instances around genre converge with a fundamental idea put forward by Bakthin (1986): the heteroglossia. This entails the multi-variedness and multi-voicedness of every discourse; the fact that
different parts of a discourse reflect multiple voices in terms of social positions, orientation towards what is being said, articulation of expectations and roles in the interaction. On a similar level, the transmission of a set of policies (in terms of texts, protocols and forms) can be conceptualised as a process through which an institutional discourse is decontextualised, elaborated and recontextualised (Silverstein and Urban 1996; Blommaert 2001) in the situated culture of a children’s centre professional team.

In this sense, the LE method can unravel two lines of inquiry, both of which are fruitful for the understanding of the dimensions involved in the field of inter-professional work: the level of congruence between the genre and the institutional context, and the level of meaning or effect that the genre entails. The first aspect is related to a promising domain of exploration: the connection between genre and normativity; the second aspect refers to the layered nature of the genre, which entails the co-occurrence of different genres in real communicative events. The former line of inquiry can shed light on the way in which a production of a particular register is intertwined with the normative expectations about it. The latter opens up possibilities to investigate not only the complex structures of a macro-genre (such as the TAC meeting), but also the level of agency of an individual (how a professional manages the sub-genres, whether he/she is able to act in an effective way in order to make his/her point of view on the child’s case visible), on a micro-level. These orientations can potentially lead to new ways of researching issues of identity and the relationship between the individual and the institution, by revealing the hidden tensions between agency and normativity. For example in the sharing of information (e.g. the CAF format), how inscribed in the policy mandates it is, or the degree to which the professional judgment can be exercised in relation to given protocols, and so on. Returning to the example provided above, if we analyse a TAC meeting as a macro-genre, we should also take into account the different sub-genres within it: question-answer sequences, narratives, reading aloud the minutes of the previous meeting, the presentation of each professional’s review, conversational interpositions. In negotiating the balance between rules, processes, and professional contributions, there may be a significant movement between the multiple sub-genres that different professionals develop (or in which they try to perform). This can potentially lead to finding new ways to negotiate the object and the aims of the activity in collaborative practice.

Conclusions

In this paper, the main theoretical and methodological issues involved in the study of inter-professional work have been discussed. They highlight that the complexity of the research site cannot be reduced to a descriptive account of the features that constitute the system of activity and cannot be exclusively analysed through the conceptual lenses of Activity Theory Framework. In fact, although useful to depict the elements that characterise the situated culture of activity and participation within the children’s centre, AT framework does not yet allow the recognition and more in-depth exploration of the interplay between structural organisation, social positioning and agency. In this sense, a possible direction for the future development of AT could be a deeper focus on how discourse negotiates and shapes the relationship between structure and agency in practice.
In order to do so, more sophisticated and refined tools are needed in order to investigate the process of policy mediation. In this sense, Linguistic Ethnography can powerfully elaborate on the concept of recontextualisation by developing an enhanced sensitivity towards a situated practice through understanding both the tension and the possibility of (re)creating and transforming an external mandate through an interpretative activity. This is made possible with a fine-grained analysis of discursive patterns by the articulation of specific genres that reflect the negotiation between local practices and institutional orders.
References

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