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Beyond the Romantic impulse for authentic data to coconstruction of meaning in interview-based educational research

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Abstract

Qualitative interviewing places emphasis on obtaining authentic data about respondent's subjective worlds through establishing rapport and empathy using strategies of researcher sensitivity with participants. Active interviewing suggests more attention should be paid to the coconstruction of meaning in the interview and qualitative researchers influenced by the discourse analytic tradition have directed attention to language and its constitutive role in producing such meanings. A dual consideration of the coconstruction of meaning enhanced by a discourse analytic focus on the language of representation is a potentially fruitful methodological fusion, which I explore here. In this paper I give examples from a recent focus group interview study of international student learning (Melles, 2004b), and in-depth interviews with ESL teachers (Melles, 2004a), which exemplify the constitutive role of language and the collaborative production of meaning in interviews.

Introduction: Beyond authenticity and subjective worlds

Among the range of media, therapeutic and other interviews in society, ‘the research interview aims to obtain authentic, detailed accounts from an individual’ (Brenner, Brown, & Canter, 1985, p. 3). Qualitative texts discuss techniques of obtaining authentic data through establishing rapport, encouraging story telling, using probing questions, active listening and other behaviours (Bernard, 1988, pp. 203–224; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; McCracken, 1988; Minichiello, 1990). In in-depth interviews, interviewees are encouraged to reveal their lives, deep thoughts, and beliefs in an atmosphere of honesty, sympathy and respect (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, pp. 100–103) albeit tinged with potential emotional consequences for the interviewer (Arksey & Knight, 1999). In his review of interview methods Silverman (2001) refers to this approach as the emotionalist version of interview data in which the ‘primary issue is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences’ (p. 87) typically using unstructured open-ended interviews. Silverman suggests the key weakness of this emotionalist perspective is that the researcher may ‘have uncritically taken on board a commonsense assumption about the immediacy and validity of accounts of human experience’ (p. 93).

Thus, in an environment where interviewing partakes of the general cultural approval of talk and personal narration (Cameron, 2000), conventional interviewing unwittingly takes up with the ‘the elevation of the experiential as the authentic—the selfsame gambit that can make the TV chat show or news interview so appealing’ (Silverman, 2001, p. 94), where search for authenticity and truth, ‘are precisely the aims of the mass media with their endless chat shows ... appeals of “authenticity” and of direct contact with human “experience” (Silverman, 1997, p. 249). As a result,
interview researchers may be engaging in a form of cultural reproduction rather than cultural critique. As a cultural form, ‘the interview society provides both a sense of who we are and the method by which we represent ourselves and our experiences ... the interview’s ubiquity serves to produce communicatively and ramify the very culture it ostensibly only inquires about’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 47). Thus, wittingly or not, ‘researchers too often recapitulate, in an uncritical fashion, features of the contemporary interview society’ (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 304).

The second issue facing conventional interviewing in educational settings is the search for the authentic subjective world of the participant, as interview researchers aim to enter into participant’s worlds or minds. Thus, Rossman and Rallis (1998) propose that the ‘hallmark’ of qualitative research, in-depth interviewing ‘takes you into participants’ worlds, at least as far as they can (or choose to) verbally relate what is in their minds’ (p. 124). The focus on minds in conventional interviewing is underscored by a separation of beliefs from action, or interview from observation as in anthropology (Duranti, 1997). So Arksey and Knight (1999) claim ‘it is the world of beliefs and meanings, not of actions, that is clarified by the interview’ (p. 15). Such approaches abstract the performative nature of talk from action, a position which philosophers of language have summarily critiqued (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969; Wittgenstein & Anscombe, 2001). As Potter (1996) notes in his explanation of the anticognitivism inherent in discourse analysis ‘inner representations are inferred from various representational practices involving talk and writing, and such inferences tend to circularity with the inner representations being used, in turn, to explain those representational practices’ (p. 103). Thus, there is a need to revisit the performative nature of the interview and question the assumption that responses reflect subjective worlds.

The focus on minds also adopts an individual rather than a social view of both subjectivity and the origin of responses in existing discourses. In a broadly Foucaultian sense, discourse is understood here to mean ‘the concern is with talk and texts as parts of social practice’ (Potter, 1996, p. 105). A sensitivity to discourses means interviewee (and interviewer) responses emerge from socially conventionalised ways of viewing the world. Thus, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) observe the need in interview to problematise the assumption of the subject in dialogue, a subject whose responses are both formed by available discourses and who strategically takes up positions within discourses in representing him or herself. From a discourse perspective, language builds activities, connections, identities and relationships, the meaning and value of aspects of the material world, and other elements of reality (Gee, 1999). Interviews are thus performative, ‘interviewer and interviewee actively construct some version of the world appropriate to what we take to be self-evident about the person to whom we are speaking and the context of the question’ (Silverman, 2001, p. 86).

In response to this Romantic impulse in interviewing to focus on ‘the authenticity of narrated experience’ (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 304), the active interview focus on the narrative positioning of respondents in the coconstruction of meaning wedded to a discourse analytic focus on the language of interview interaction can provide a potential corrective. Combined with active interviewing the discourse analytic tradition focuses, therefore, on the performative nature of the interview, ‘serving a particular function in the context of a given exchange’ (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 120).
Coconstructed meaning and language in active interviewing

Interview methodologists seem to be aware of the joint production of discourse although this does not necessarily translate into a focus about how this is achieved and the constitutive contributions of interviewer and interviewee. For example, Mishler (1986) argues that qualitative interviewing is distinct from other forms of interviewing in its attention to the joint production of discourse. This joint production and ‘implicit, or explicit sharing and/or negotiation of understanding in the interview situation’ (Brenner et al., 1985, p. 3) is seen as a particular strength of interviewing compared to other forms of social research. Kvale (1996) also emphasises the need to consider the ‘joint social creation’ and ‘neglect of the interviewer’s constructive contributions’ (p.183) through a fixation on decontextualised transcripts.

This lack of detailed focus on the construction process is addressed by more recent social constructionist approaches, in particular active interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995). One of the key claims of social constructionism is that meanings and understandings of the world are ‘social artefacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people’ (Gergen, 1994, p. 49). From the constructionist perspective interview accounts are not simply representations of the world but ‘part of the world they describe’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 107). Thus, social constructionism emphasises the production of meaning in interaction as opposed to its presumed ‘discovery’ beneath the language of the respondent.

Active interviewing also argues for the relevance of the reality represented in the interview or ‘what is substantively asked and conveyed’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 114). Holstein and Gubrium (1997) claim that active interviewing sees the ‘process of meaning production to be as important for social research as the meaning that is produced’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 4). Silverman (2001) accurately notes that the focus on the what (meaning produced) of interviews constitutes a retreat from social constructionist inspired discourse analysis, which questions extratextual reality (e.g., Parker, 1998; Potter, 1996). In fact, the significance of some reality external to the interview process is an issue hotly debated by social constructionists, particularly those who wish to critique current social, political and educational processes (Burr, 1995). Realities alluded to in analysis are socially complex. The goal is to report interviewee responses ‘without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that condition the meaning making process’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 127). Such circumstances include knowledge of the positions—social, political, institutional, cultural—from which interviewers may respond. Thus, where possible ‘active interviewers should be familiar with the material, cultural and interpretive circumstances to which respondents might orient, and with the vocabulary through which experience will be conveyed’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 77).

Contextualising responses in active interviewing involves more than just attending to the immediately preceding and following turn. Nijhof (1997) reminds interviewers that researchers need to look at response work and how subsequent answers from respondents are readings of earlier questions. In addition, analysis of interview data also attends to rhetorical structuring in the ‘storying’ of experience and the function of events as they are performed according to implicit and explicit cultural conventions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, pp. 54–81). Thirdly, recognition of the collaborative nature of the interview does not mean the interviewee and interviewer are in an equal relationship—‘it is a unique form of collaboration that is framed by
the researcher, but that still becomes the interviewee’s story’ (Hiller & Diluzio, 2004, p. 6). These are additional assumptions that need to be acknowledged in the analysis of text.

**Discourse analytic focus on displaying identities**

Kvale (1996) observes, that ‘it has been rare in the social sciences for interview researchers to analyse the language medium they use as tools for and objects of their research’ (p. 43). Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest this relative ignorance of language arises through acceptance of a ‘discredited’ view of transparency of language that allow respondents to tell it like it is assuming that ‘words mean the same thing to the interviewer and the interviewees’ (p. 11). This is to forget, as Cameron (2001) observes that discourse ‘is not pure content, not just a window on someone’s mental or social world; it has to be considered as discourse’ (p. 17).

Thus, constructionist approaches ‘do not view attitudes as stable, mental dispositions (that the individual ‘owns’) but as products of social interaction’ (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 102). This is an inherently dialogic Bakhtinian view of spoken genres (Bakhtin, Morris, Voloshinov, & Medvedev, 1994), where particular utterances are always preceded and followed by other utterances that help constitute the meaning of the utterance in focus. Thus, a constructionist focus on interview interaction adopts a pragmatist focus on knowledge and truth as (re)produced through conversation rather than mirroring some objective reality (Cherryholmes, 1999; Rorty, 1980, 1989, 1991).

It includes a focus on the interpretive orientation interviewees bring, ‘how they frame their experiences from particular standpoints and how these sometimes overshadow other equally informative interpretations’ (Hathaway & Atkinson, 2003, p. 164); interview work is face work; versions and accounts of reality that are given intend to produce acceptable identities for interviewees. Interview responses are not therefore true or false reports of reality but rather ‘displays of perspectives and moral forms’ (p. 112). As displays, responses are ways of accomplishing particular actions related to how individuals wish to present their stake or interest in a topic and the degree to which their claims are shared consensually (Potter, 1996, pp. 108–121).

Spoken language in context (discourse) involves the production of identities, ‘something people are continually constructing and reconstructing in their encounters with each other and the world’ (Cameron, 2001, p. 170). As a result, within interview transcripts variable and even conflicting responses can be seen ‘as the product of participants’ situated interpretative practices’ (Potter & Mulkay, 1985, p. 265) and will occur as a result of participants positioning themselves acceptably with respect to the world, the setting and the interviewer. In fact, as Potter and Mulkay (1985) argue, not only is variation to be expected but also ‘interview data should be used to reveal the interpretative practices through which participants come to construct versions of their social world’ (p. 248). Thus, Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) demonstrate the empiricist and contingent repertoires research scientists use, respectively to present theory choice as consensually accepted facts about the way the world is (empiricist) or to represent disagreement in the scientific community or the failure of others to adopt particular theories seen as inevitable (contingent).
Coconstruction of meaning and a focus on language in interview settings: two examples

Thus, active interviewing informed by the discourse analytic tradition invites qualitative researchers to consider the constitutive role of language and interaction in producing meaning. It is a hybrid approach that can be used to explore interview interaction and use the full range of biographical, social, political and other resources to motivate responses and questions. In cases such as the life story interview where personal narrative is a prime focus, the rhetorical structuring of experience can be explored as well as the production of accounts of behaviour and experience that are seen to be socially acceptable. It has application also for all contexts of interviewing, since even where biographies and narrative are not a prime focus there is still institutional, social, and potentially cultural work providing resources and positions for individuals to answer from.

Example 1: Focus group interviews with second language students

The first example I take from a report (Melles, 2004b) on focus group interviews with 19 South East Asian students (Indonesia and China) regarding group work in higher education. Using a series of prompt questions in a semistructured interview format, students, who had responded to advertising, were invited to reflect on their experience of group work. As a lecturer in the institution I was aware through my own teaching experiences and through institutional reports that group work was somewhat problematic. I also knew that some of the interviewees had experienced group work as part of ESL subjects within the faculty of Arts taught by colleagues; these ‘peer’ experiences I asked participants to avoid for ethical reasons. A picture of group work as potentially beneficial to learning but dependent on clarity of student–teacher relationships, cross-cultural expectations, curriculum purposes, and so forth, was also a conclusion that a review of the literature, including institutional evaluations, confirmed.

Despite the official anonymity of the study, students were doing face work in the interview with regard to their own identities and their assessment of my institutional position, some of which appeared culturally motivated. For example, in the study I note how the desire for and linguistic representation of group consensus among Indonesian students (a cultural disposition) was visible but could be challenged by encouraging students to ‘shift narrative position’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 77) by including in groupings Chinese students who were prepared to openly critique institutional practice. Inclusion in the study and admission of difficulties in an environment where deficit views of foreign students prevailed among academics could help produce students who were marginalised, and two Chinese students explicitly rejected the relevance of culture to learning difficulties. As I noted, the deferral or resistance in taking up culture and language ‘may be due to some of the face work they do in the interview and a desire to resist taking up a discourse of cultural difference as problematic’ (Melles, 2004b, p. 233).

Some detailed analysis of language use also proved significant. In particular, I noted how pronoun usage and agency in responses correlated with the overall positive or negative experience of students as successful or not successful members of classroom communities. Thus, for example, those reporting successful experiences (five students) use the pronoun *we* and active verbs to identify their membership of
a successful active classroom community, for example: ‘We work together’, ‘We design a system’.

A second group (five students), who note somewhat less successful experiences, employ we also with active verbs but this we is not identified totally with the group, which is attached to the utterance by a prepositional phrase as an external body, for example: ‘We get more knowledge from our group members’. A third group (nine students) who express some significant misgivings about working in groups generally avoid using we and either use passive sentences or modals of obligation (have to, must) in relation their experience of group work, for example: ‘It is required of me to explore my ideas’; I have to do this in group work’. Thus, I note that attending to pronoun use and verb forms in focus group responses correlates with the overall experience of students with group work.

Example 2: Interviewing ESL teachers on views of curriculum

The second example comes from a chapter in my unpublished thesis (Melles, 2004a) exploring the dynamics of ESL curriculum as taught in a vocational New Zealand polytechnic. In one chapter I report on the responses of 10 practitioners and managers to questions regarding how they define curriculum. As the first question in the interview the initial question ‘offers resources and points of references for the conversation to come’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 40).

At the time of the interviews most of those interviewed were peers who had worked with me for several years and I used this background as a resource both in accessing and interviewing them. From the perspective of background knowledge shared between the respondent and I, it is not a question that practitioners consider in abstract since on a day-to-day basis they do curriculum through social interactions in the classroom. In fact, I explored this performance of the curriculum in the following chapter using teacher talk as naturalistic data sources for analysis. The interview question, however, interrupts this routine activity and somewhat artificially requires respondents to position themselves with respect to either broad principles of education or to institutional discourses; this is also a weakness for similar questions on other institutional practices.

In the example that follows I focus on the linguistic choices of some respondents to my first question which was: How do you define curriculum? In the context of the vocational sector in New Zealand (and Australia) such a question invites individuals to position themselves with respect to either education or the institution. That is, they may respond by providing a definition that articulates curriculum external to institutional documentation processes, for example, curriculum documents, and national guidelines such as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in the case of New Zealand. Alternatively, they may take up the institutional discourses of curriculum in a first instance.

In the example that follows an experienced teacher-manager with a significant background in educational research responds to the question, providing what she calls a ‘narrow’ definition. In the example text, Helen explicitly refers to the interruptive nature of the question (I haven’t much thought about) as something with no prior mutual conversational context (we haven’t discussed yet), and as a
question that she interprets based on an interview preamble has assumptions attached *(that you’ve alluded to).*

**GAVIN**

How do you define the term *curriculum*? What does it mean to you when somebody says that?

**HELEN**

I guess in the narrowest sense of the word it means everything that the teacher plans and does in the classroom with the students including the learning, obviously things like the learning outcomes, and the materials that are used and the forms of assessment that are decided upon and ... the style, really even I guess, the style of learning that’s being, that the teacher is trying to encourage for example or using, the style that the teacher is using to facilitate the learning ... So that’s the kind of narrow sense of the word I suppose for me because around that are the things that you’ve alluded to that we, that I haven’t much thought about and we haven’t discussed yet.

In providing this ‘narrow’ definition, Helen positions the teacher and student as the centre around which curriculum activities are located. Following this passage, she continues to define some of the other broader sense of curriculum she sees as relevant.

In both this passage and her other contributions she takes up some of the language of curriculum documents, for example, ‘outcomes’, ‘assessment’, ‘facilitate’, although avoids linking curriculum with documents explicitly until I introduce the contrast of curriculum as process or product.

**HELEN**

I mean at the moment in this job that I’m doing I think that often I’m seeing curriculum as product because I’m seeing curriculum documents.

In the following passage Helen claims the visibility of curriculum documents in her position *requires her* to see curriculum as a document and in what follows (and precedes) she rejects this as a natural reading. For example, in the text above, Helen avoids taking up the curriculum document as a natural boundary for practice, preferring to represent curriculum as socially produced. Her response sharply contrasts with a second example from an ESL practitioner that shows how a practitioner with serious reservations about the competency-based philosophy of vocational institutions immediately circumscribes curriculum in terms of documents.

**GAVIN**

How do you define curriculum?

**JANE**

I guess a curriculum is a document. A statement of intent is what I see a curriculum as being, outlining user gains and philosophies.

This initial response provides an index for what follows in that the ‘narrow’
circumscription of the curriculum as a document becomes a precursor to a sustained critique of institutional control over practitioner classroom practices—an accountability to a framework that acts to produce guilt.

JANE
Yes. It boils down to what your morals are in many ways I suppose. It becomes an ethical factor. You teach what you know the students need, so it’s a very subjective approach or many people teach that way. And at the end of the year you look back at the curriculum and document and think, oh my god I said I was going to do this, that and the other, but they weren’t up to it. That wasn’t appropriate for them and yet I’ve said here that this was what we’re going to do and I haven’t done it. So then you start getting the guilts because you haven’t lived up to the expectations of the curriculum which is really a very abstract thought process constructed by one or a few people within the bounds of the outline of what you have to write in this document anyway.

Thus, these two previous examples, taken somewhat at random, show how positions are taken with respect to curriculum, which are then developed in a similar vein throughout the interview. What is significant about these two responses (and that of others in the interviews), institutionally, is that they come from two educators working in close collaboration in a vocational setting where a consistent vision of curriculum and classroom practice is claimed to operate. As I also illustrate in the study, there is some indication in the language of interviewees and in the substantive comments of one key participant that gender seems to drive the subjective ‘needs-based’ discourse of classroom practice as alluded to in the above quote.

Discussion and conclusion

Active interviewing reminds us that the interview is an occasion for the collaborative production of meaning. Common and different social, biographical, cultural and other histories influence the positions interviewees take up with respect to questions asked. Interviewees may acknowledge linguistically how the interview positions them and narratives are produced with a sense of consistency of response from the initial question. The fine detail of language can also indicate processes of meaning production that are consistent with the performance of identities in the interview, and this data needs to be interrogated. In adopting both a discourse analytic and active constructionist approach to the interview discursive positioning and the complex production of meaning can be more adequately represented.

References


