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Convers-actions: conversations about action/action through conversations

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What I do is draw the shape of an umbrella on the board and I put in the spokes of the umbrella. I suggest to the students that in any one of these areas, there is a contestation of discourse which brings with it powers and limitations, freedoms, responsibilities and accountabilities. I propose to them that if they are responsible thinking people then they know how to move between those discourses. And we talk about discourses having power, permission and privileges. (Monica quoted in Nayler, 2003a: 54)

These words were spoken by a secondary school English teacher, known in my research as Monica, during a ‘substantive conversation’ (1) we shared in June 2002 (see Nayler, 2003a for the full narrative). This narrative, along with three others, was developed as part of a doctoral research project, Socially-just pedagogies: Exploring the spaces.

Monica’s narrative, and the research processes used to develop the narrative, illuminate many generative possibilities for teachers’ pedagogies and for research methodologies, that emerge from the concept of ‘convers-actions’. At least two generative possibilities are considered here. First, Monica’s narrative, along with three others, emerged from substantive conversations about action for socially-just pedagogies. This generative possibility relates to research methodologies. Second, Monica’s narrative suggests the ways in which ‘agentic professionals’ (Nayler, 2003b) take action for social justice through conversation. For the purposes of this paper ‘conversation’ refers not only to the informal verbal exchange of ideas but is used as a metaphor for broader social practices involving language. That is to say, within the broad range of discursive productions, which includes, but is not confined to, conversation, teachers and others take up particular discourses and resist others. The key message of this paper is that ‘agentic professionals’ (Nayler, 2003b) take action for social justice through the deliberate choices they make within discursive productions.

Overview of the paper
The central purpose of this paper, that is, to explore the generative possibilities for teachers’ pedagogies provided by the practice of ‘agentic professionalism’ (Nayler, 2003b), is achieved through the exploration of several key areas. First, a brief overview is provided of the research project which used substantive conversations as the key methodology. The ways in which conversation about action was integral to the research project are explored in this section. Second, the theoretical frame that shaped this study is examined. Third, the concept of
‘agentic professionalism’ (Nayler, 2003b) is examined by linking it to the study’s theoretical frame and to Monica’s practice. Finally, some concluding comments are made in relation to the support that teachers might require in order to take up the role of the agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b).

The research project: substantive conversations about action for social justice

Individual substantive conversations between the researcher and practising teachers constituted the key data-gathering method used in the research project. Socially-just pedagogies: Exploring the spaces. The theoretical frame, explored in the next section, was informed by feminist poststructuralism. Discourse analysis (Alldred, 1998) was the methodology used to analyse the narratives that were developed from the substantive conversations. The overall purpose of the study was to explore the discourses associated with what might be termed socially-just pedagogies. Specifically, three key questions formed the focus of this research:

1. What discourses might be associated with socially-just pedagogies?
2. What discourses might inhibit socially-just pedagogies?
3. What do socially-just pedagogies look like in practice?

Setting the scene for the research proper

In September 2001, prior to conducting the substantive conversations, an open forum to explore the nature of pedagogy, generally, and socially-just pedagogies, in particular, was held. Sixteen educators, including practising teachers, attended this forum in response to an open invitation. During March and April 2002 a series of two focus groups was held at each of six sites in and around Brisbane. Four of the six school-based cohorts consisted of staff members who attended the sessions voluntarily. Two schools opted to participate in the focus groups in lieu of other professional development activity. At these schools staff members were expected to attend the sessions. A further focus group participant, who had attended the open forum and who subsequently participated in a substantive conversation (known in the study as Tina) joined another school in order to participate as her own school was not involved. Again, the attention in the focus groups was the collaborative exploration of pedagogy itself and what might constitute socially-just pedagogies. In addition, the focus group participants examined their practice in relation to the Productive Pedagogies, a framework which emerged from the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) (Lingard, Ladwig, Mills, Bahr, Chant, Warr, Ailwood, Capeness, Christie, Gore, Hayes, & Luke, 2001a). This framework was of considerable interest to both state and non-state teachers. Importantly, the purposes of both the forum and the focus groups were two-fold: to explore meanings of pedagogy and socially-just pedagogies and to nurture research relationships for later work.

Data gathering

The data gathering for the research proper occurred through the substantive conversations and subsequent follow-up communication with teachers involved. Thirteen individual substantive conversations with Queensland state and non-state primary and secondary teachers were held from May to July 2002 as part of this research. The 13 teachers, who included 12 primary teachers and one
secondary teacher, had all participated in the series of focus groups. By electing to participate in the substantive conversations these teachers were nominating themselves as teachers practising what they considered to be socially-just pedagogies.

It was the literature related to ‘semi-structured interviews’ (Reinharz, 1992) that informed the nature of these scheduled interactions between the researcher and each ‘co-investigator’ (2), a term used to describe each teacher who participated in a substantive conversation. Open-ended questions were used to support co-investigators to talk about how they practised socially-just pedagogies, what such a term meant to them, along with how they described their practice using the Productive Pedagogies (QSRLS, 2001b) as a lens. Importantly, the co-investigators were invited to direct the discussion. The questions used to stimulate the substantive conversations were shared with co-investigators prior to the discussion. These substantive conversations could be further described as informal and friendly. Each substantive conversation lasted two hours and was taped, transcribed and used as a basis for the collaborative development of the narratives. From the 13 substantive conversations conducted, narratives were developed based on four of these. A draft of each narrative was shared with the relevant co-investigator. Subsequent collaborative development of each narrative involved verbal and written communication, with each co-investigator deleting, adding and modifying text to achieve a narrative with which each was satisfied.

It is important to stress that the narratives are the product of both the researcher and the co-investigator. As suggested elsewhere (see Nayler, 2003a), it needs to be acknowledged that I asked particular questions and responded in particular ways to responses made by my co-investigators. Furthermore, I selected particular examples from the field texts and re-presented them with particular language. Hence, my subjectivities, especially in terms of my agenda to pursue an investigation of socially-just pedagogies are implicated (Jones, 1992) in all of the narratives in both explicit and implicit ways.

Data analysis
The narratives themselves then are a form of analysis. Mishler (1995: 117) highlights this point when he says that ‘we retell our respondents’ accounts through our analytic redescriptions’. So there is no sense in this study that the narratives are ‘natural’ or that they reflect a ‘real’ or ‘true’ picture of the practice of the four teachers. Rather the narratives are ‘representational technologies [as opposed to] reflections or traces of psychological processes’ (Nespor & Barylske, 1991: 806). Following Keddie (2001: 115–116) my purpose in deploying narratives is to ‘(re)present and illuminate the complexities and dynamics of the participants’ (re)constructions of their experiences and relationships and in this sense, incite a proliferation of thoughts and emotions for the reader’. (See Nayler, 2003a for a further elaboration of narrative as a form of analysis.)
The commentaries that were developed to accompany each narrative represent the main form of data or field text analysis in the study. These commentaries, which are located in the main folio item produced as a result of this study (Nayler, 2003a), are located along the bottom of each page, below the narratives themselves (following Lather & Smithies, 1997). The commentaries are informed by feminist poststructural theorising (see Davies, 1994; Alldred, 1998) strengthened, not weakened, by a cautious stance. Each commentary proposes the discourses and subjectivities that might be operating in each narrative. These commentaries acknowledge and celebrate the co-investigators as educators whose actions are the result of discourses that they shape and which shape them. Importantly, the commentaries suggest the nature of discourses that might be operating to support socially-just pedagogies, as well as those discourses that might be inhibiting such practice.

Issues of validity and generalisability associated with this research are explored in detail elsewhere (see Nayler, 2003a). No claims are made in this research that definitive statements about teachers’ practice can be made on the basis of the four narratives, or in the case of this paper, on the basis of Monica’s story. What is claimed here is that there is value in particular stories about particular people in particular contexts. The particularities suggested by the narratives are redolent of broader socio-cultural practices. Alldred (1998: 155) highlights this when she claims that:

The participant’s ‘voice’ is seen as produced from what was culturally available to her/him, rather than from a private reserve of meaning. The fantasy of the authentic subject, one whose subjectivity is imagined to be independent of, or prior to, culture is rejected.

The narrative, conceptualised as it is here, reflects postmodernity’s emphasis on difference, particularity and irregularity as opposed to progress, universality and regularity (Elkind, 1997). Specifically, it is the feminist poststructural theoretical frame, used to inform this project, that is explored in the next section.

The feminist poststructural theoretical frame
According to feminist poststructuralist, Adams St Pierre (2000: 484), ‘we word our world’. The apparent simplicity of this statement belies the complexity of feminist poststructural frameworks. Within this theoretical frame the notion of objective truth for all times is rejected, along with the security of the grand narrative (Lyotard, 1984). In other words, feminist poststructuralists challenge the existence of a body of immutable facts that happen to be ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered or that grand narratives can reflect the particularity and specificity of people’s lives and events.

Feminist poststructural theorising unsettles those taken-for-granted notions that have dominated Western thinking. Nicholson (1989: 98) refers to ‘a crisis in the
authority and the conceptual systems of Western culture’ and Lather (1991: 87) describes it as ‘the disappointed hopes engendered by optimistic confidence in the continuing progress and imminent triumph of Enlightenment reason’. It has been the use of the ‘grand narrative’ or ‘discourse’ that Lyotard (1984) challenges as inadequate to explain the complex, interconnected and sometimes contradictory events across time and space. In other words, general or overarching stories cannot capture local and diverse events as humanist or technicist storylines would invite us to believe.

Our Western institutions, including our schools, are built on the notion of ‘legitimate’ knowledge as that which draws heavily upon the notions of universal reason, the scientific and industrial base, as well as a world in which autonomous individuals contribute to humanity’s steady progress. Cherryholmes (1988: 30) writes that ‘structuralism’, a ‘pervasive and often unacknowledged way of thinking [which] has influenced twentieth-century thinking, in important ways...promises order, organization, and certainty’. In contrast, poststructuralists ‘question the possibility of truths that are objective in the sense of being necessary, universal, and unchanging’ (Nicholson, 1989: 198). It is the poststructuralist emphasis on the language and discourses which we use to constitute ourselves, our knowledge of the world, as well as the ways in which we are constituted by discourses that is integral to the practice of agentic professionalism. As proposed earlier, it is the constitutive processes of language through discourses that are suggested through the metaphor of conversation.

Agentic professionalism: links to theory
Agentic professionalism (Nayler, 2003b) resonates with the generative spaces available within poststructural feminism. Despite a recognition of the somewhat uneasy alliance between feminism and poststructuralism (see Fraser & Nicholson, 1990), ‘feminists and others representing disadvantaged groups use poststructural critiques of language, particularly deconstruction, to make visible how language operates to produce very real, material, and damaging structures in the world’ (Adams St Pierre, 2000: 481). Further, Weedon (1997: 23) suggests the appeal of poststructuralism to feminists when she writes, ‘once language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world, which imply differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle’. The central mechanism through which feminist poststructuralists engage with language as a site of political struggle is through a recognition of the discourses that constitute us and with which we constitute ourselves. As Kress (1985: 6) points out, discourses ‘define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension—what it is possible to do or not to do)’.

The concept of ‘convers-actions’ then resonates with the agentic professional who recognises that we are all ‘spoken into existence’ (Alloway, 1995: 9) and speak ourselves into existence in particular ways. As teachers, mothers, fathers, young people, teachers, Australians, Muslims and so on we are variously constituted so that our social roles are identifiable and meaningful (Lankshear, 1994: 6). It is through language that these social roles are mediated. The term, ‘conversaction’,
therefore, provides an appropriate metaphor through which to examine the complex and often contradictory ways in which “responsible thinking people...know how to move between these discourses” (Monica quoted in Nayler, 2003a: 54).

The work of the agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b) is supported by an understanding of discourses, as well as an appreciation of the power relations implicit in discursive arrangements. The identifiable social roles that are produced by discourses are accompanied by possibilities and constraints in relation to who can speak with authority and who speaks without authority, thus, making some forms of knowledge more powerful than others. Importantly then, particular discourses rely on specific forms of knowledge. Moon (2001: 172) suggests the way in which power is inevitably implicated in the operation of discourses and knowledge when he proposes that ‘power is an effect of unequal relations between people that society recognises as belonging to certain groups. Social practices sort people into a variety of groups’. He continues on to say that ‘because power is an effect of social structure, and not an absolute force imposed from above, nobody is completely powerful or powerless’ concluding that ‘people have different degrees of power, depending up on how they are “located” in society’ (emphasis in original) [with such location being] ‘not entirely fixed’ nor ‘freely changeable’ (Moon, 2001: 172).

It is the contention here that the agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b) recognises the operation of discourses and the ways in which particular discourses are more powerful than others. Further, it is claimed here that to be agentic one needs to make choices as to which discourses one will take up and which discourses one will resist. It is important to note that the term agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b) draws on Davies’ (1990, 2000) contention that agency, saturated as it is with humanist meanings, can be reconstructed through a feminist poststructural lens as discursively produced (see Nayler, 2003b for a fuller discussion). The agentic professional then is one who makes deliberate choices, while recognising the socially-constructed nature of choices Davies (2000: 60) alludes to when she says that:

choices are understood as more akin to ‘forced choices’, since the subject’s positioning within particular discourses makes the ‘chosen’ line of action the only possible action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one’s placement within that discourse to want that line of action. (emphasis in original)

Agentic professionalism: links to practice
Monica’s narrative is drawn upon in this paper to propose what the agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b) might look like. As discussed earlier, it is proposed that the agentic professional recognises the operation of discourses, as well as her/his own positioning in relation to such discourses, and intentionally takes up particular discourses and resists others.
In her comments, used at the outset of this paper, Monica uses the metaphor of an umbrella to propose to her students that a multiplicity of discourses operates in each of their lives and that each discourse is accompanied by particular ‘powers and limitations freedoms, responsibilities, and accountabilities’ (Monica in Nayler, 2003a: 54). She also introduces the idea that these discourses are often contestatory, that is, particular discourses might not align with some other discourses. Significant discourses in the lives of Monica’s students at a Catholic, boys’ school probably include those related to being a son, a student, a part-time employee, a partner, a Catholic or a follower of some other faith-based system, a footballer (or other sportsperson) and so on. Some of these discourses will speak Monica’s students into existence (Alloway, 1995: 9) in ways that conflict with the ways in which they are constituted, and constitute themselves, as a result of other discourses. Further analysis of Monica’s practices reflects her role as an agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b).

Not only does Monica support her students to deconstruct or unpack the discourses operating in their lives, she proposes generative action. She says ‘responsible, thinking people...know how to move between those discourses’ (Monica in Nayler, 2003a: 54). As an agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b) Monica supports her students to ‘see through poststructural eyes’ (Davies, 1994: 26). The liberatory possibilities of such actions are highlighted by Sawicki (1991: 27) when she comments that, ‘freedom does not basically lie in discovering or being able to determine who we are, but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized, and classified’. This example demonstrates Monica’s articulation of processes associated with the operation of discourses, along with the need to take up and resist particular discourses. The following example shows Monica’s practical use of that process.

Monica’s actions in relation to a Year 12 student who wrote a particularly violent text in response to a writing task demonstrate her engagement with, and resistance of, particular discourses. She recalls:

Some years ago a piece of work was brought to me as Head of English by a teacher who had refused to mark it—it was incredibly violent and incredibly bloody. Basically, it was about decapitation and disembowelling and set within the most beautiful, beautiful scenery. The teacher was very angry about the work and felt professionally insulted by it. And the more I looked at the work the more disquieted I became. I talked with the student who wrote the work and asked him to talk to me about what had prompted this piece of writing. I discovered that the student had been in a situation of civil war and he had actually seen members of his own family decapitated and disembowelled and for him this piece of writing was by way of catharsis. (Monica in Nayler, 2003a: 53)

In this case, Monica resisted a dominant schooling discourse that suggests that such writing does not have a place as an assessment piece. She resisted this invitation to truth about what constitutes an assessment task, about what
can be said, what cannot be said and so on. In resisting this discourse she supported the student to reflect on his own traumatic experiences of violence in which he witnessed the brutal killing of his own family. There was a clear demarcation, however, of the extent to which Monica was able and prepared to resist dominant schooling discourses. Her advice to the student was not to draw on these experiences in the writing task of the Queensland Core Skills Test (3). In this case Monica appeared to make a judgement that the discourses of violence underpinning the text would not be valued or understood in the externally-marked writing task.

Monica’s experience suggests a key aspect of agentic professionalism: when do we challenge dominant discourses which in the short term might position our students or ourselves in less than favourable ways? As a dedicated professional with sophisticated understandings of the need to support students to make connections between their language learning and the worlds they inhabit, Monica could resist discourses operating within the local context, but adopted a more pragmatic approach in her support of her student as he negotiated the regimenting mechanisms of the Queensland Core Skills Test. Monica demonstrates a very acute awareness of the discourses that speak her and her students into existence, as well as those that they draw on in order to constitute themselves. This is not surprising given that Monica teaches Year 11 and 12 English and has been engaged in, and indeed has led, significant pedagogical reform as a result of syllabus changes. Engagement in such curriculum reform, with its emphasis on text deconstruction and reconstruction, appears to support teachers in their own critical reflection of their practice and positions them well as agentic professionals.

Supporting teachers as agentic professionals
There is strong support within the literature for structures and cultures which encourage collaboration of educators in their exploration of practice (Aviram, 1996; Cooper & Henderson, 1995; Costa & Garmston, 1994; Kofman & Senge; 1993, Senge, 1990). Varying labels are applied to such structures and cultures for learning. Senge (1990), for example, calls for ‘learning organisations’, Cooper and Henderson (1995) propose ‘collaborative learning communities’ and Costa and Garmston (1994) explore the notion of ‘renaissance schools’. Sergiovanni (1992: 205) points to a key characteristic of such learning communities when he proposes that, ‘the metaphor for schooling must change from organization, instructional delivery system, processing plant, clinical setting, market garden, and so on to community’. Further, the QSRLS (2001a: 104) recommends that, ‘schools should be encouraged to create and support teacher professional learning communities inside schools through processes and structures which encourage collaboration and reflective dialogue around classroom practices and deprivatised practice within the development of a coherent school philosophy’.
What is proposed here is that the lens of agentic professionalism (Nayler, 2003b) be considered by such learning communities for its capacity to deconstruct and reconstruct the powerful discourses that have such material effects upon the lives of educators and students. The concept of ‘conversations’ serves well the concept of agentic professionalism. The agentic professional makes deliberate choices in relation to the action she or he will take in any ‘conversation’, a metaphor used in this paper to suggest the range of discursive productions in which teachers and others are involved. Specifically, the agentic professional selectively takes up some discourses and resists other discourses.

There is no intention to suggest that the agentic professional (Nayler, 2003b) can adopt a line of action that will serve the interests of the range of groups in diverse contexts or that all teachers will have similar capacities to adopt approaches redolent of agentic professionalism. Rather agentic professionalism resonates with Davies’ (2000: 68) feminist poststructural concept of agency when she claims:

Agency is spoken into existence at any one moment. It is fragmented, transitory, a discursive position that can be occupied within one discourse simultaneously with its nonoccupation in another. Within current ways of speaking it is a readily attainable positioning for some and an almost inaccessible positioning for others.

Some concluding comments
It is argued here that agentic professionalism, theorised (Nayler, 2003b) here within the feminist poststructural frame, positions teachers well to recognise the operation of discourses and the consequent power implications, as well as to intentionally take up some discourses and resist others. This paper has provided an overview of some of the ways in which feminist poststructural theorising, with its understandings of the constitutive role of language through discourses, provides a generative frame for the agentic professional. The conversations about action related to socially-just pedagogies, that formed a key part of a doctoral research project, were also explored. But more importantly, action through conversation, with conversation representing a metaphor for discursive productions generally, has been explored as a practice described here as agentic professionalism. In particular, examples of agentic professionalism have been drawn from a narrative based on the pedagogies of Monica, a secondary teacher and administrator at a Catholic school. Finally, a call is made for learning communities in schools to support teachers to explore the complex socio-political environments in which they work and specifically to identify the discourses with which they intend to engage and those which they intend to resist. Heeding Davies’ (2000: 68) analysis that ‘agency…[is] fragmented and transitory’, there is no suggestion here that agentic professionalism will be easily practised. What is clear is that learning communities are required that provide supportive and challenging
spaces for convers-actions to explore and challenge the complex ways in which discourses impact on the lives of students and teachers.

Endnotes

(1) The term, ‘substantive conversation’, is drawn from the Productive Pedagogies (QSRLS, 2001a). This element is advocated by the QSRLS researchers in order to challenge traditional classroom discourses in which ‘interaction typically consists of a lecture with recitation where the teacher deviates very little from delivering information and routine questions, and students typically give very short answers’ (QSRLS, 2001c: 5). In contrast, ‘in classes with substantive conversation there is considerable teacher-students and student-student interaction about the ideas of a substantive topic, the interaction is reciprocal and it promotes coherent shared understanding’ (QSRLS, 2001c: 5). I have deployed this term to describe the scheduled interaction or conversation I had with research ‘co-investigators’ to co-create field texts which were later used to collaboratively develop narratives.

(2) The term, ‘co-investigators’ was used to convey the sense in which those teachers who participated in the substantive conversations collaborated to investigate what might constitute socially-just pedagogies. There is no sense, however, that the co-investigators were able to influence the research to the extent that I was able to as researcher. In short, I framed the particular study, asked particular questions, selected particular words and examples and, in general, exerted much more influence over the research direction and outcomes than did the co-investigators.

(3) The Queensland Core Skills (QCS) Test is a common, state-wide test completed by Year 12 students who are seeking university entrance. The QCS Test is developed and administered by the Queensland Studies Authority. Students are tested in relation to the 49 Common Curriculum Elements of the Queensland senior curriculum.
References


Nayler, J. (2003b) Performed upon or performing? The agentic professional and socially-just pedagogies, Unpublished paper.


QSRLS see Lingard et al., 2001a, 2001b and 2001c.


