

Title of the paper: Acts of brokering in a community of practice
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This presentation reports a study which aimed at understanding the discourse of a multi-party ‘community of practice’, focusing specifically on the brokering acts and the circumstances of the brokering in a school-based professional development activity. Broker is a term coined from business, a person who facilitates mutual accommodation between different interest parties (Ng, He & Loong, 2004). A language broker in this study was defined as a person who mediated the process of decision-making and facilitated learning by bridging large knowledge-gaps regarding the subject matter and school context between the school teachers and teacher educators.

Two research questions were asked in the study: 1) how did the broker participate in the decision-making process?; and 2) what was the sequential enactment of brokering during the negotiation of decisions among the participants? To answer the questions, the meeting notes of this school-based professional development activity were transcribed and used as the data.

The learning community in question contained five members – they were two tertiary language teacher educators, two primary teachers of English, and one representative of the English department of the school. Because of the dynamics of the internal relationship within a community of practice and/or dispositions to learning (Hodkinson et al, 2004) resulting from participants’ different life and work histories (Hughes, Jewson & Unwin, 2007), inequalities of power become inevitable. Such an asymmetrical power relationship in this ‘community’ led to the emergence of the broker. The study revealed that during the group meetings, the power control was exercised mostly by the teacher educators through initiation of exchanges, nomination of topics, and closing down of an episode with a shift of topics or acceptance of a response from the teachers; while the two teachers positioned themselves mainly as respondents, who rarely initiated turns or topics except for those questions or statements raised within the content framework of the teacher educators’ turns. As such, the two teachers’

participation reinforced their position in the production of the discourse in the learning community. In contrast to her colleagues, the department representative took a different approach as a third party or the 'broker' in the negotiation. She presented her own perspectives and ideas through her own initiation of turns; joined the discussion at the time of her own choice; addressed the issues in the subtext and consequently brought to the surface the assumptions covert in other participants' utterances, which resulted in the decisions/consensus among the participants. By bridging the knowledge gap between the teacher educators and teachers, the emergence of the broker, in effect, redressed the power imbalance in this social practice and hence paved the ground for learning in the community.

The study also revealed that the enactment of broking extended beyond a basic unit of exchange in three turns by three different parties. It comprised longer chunks/segments of discourse among different parties, beginning with an utterance raised by one of the brokerees who signaled a problematic situation/scenario in need of a solution, and ending with an utterance supplied by the broker, providing a solution or part-solution, with several parties contributing to the discussion.

The findings suggest that learning would not automatically occur simply because participants come together as a team. The "mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire" (Wenger, 1998) is a cluster of dynamic concepts, which can, therefore, only be achieved through consistent negotiation, mediation and facilitation by highly engaged community members in the process of participation. A broker plays an indispensable role in such negotiation when there is a big knowledge gap among the members of a learning community.

Reference list

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