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# Doing collaborative reflection in the professional experience

Jess Harris and Jayne Keogh

**ABSTRACT:** *Despite the importance of the school-based practicum experience in teacher education programs, only limited research has investigated how supervising and pre-service teacher roles and relationships are interactively achieved in situ. Using conversation analysis, we interrogate extracts of practicum talk between supervising teachers (STs) and their pre-service teachers (PTs), revealing that asymmetrical relationships are talked into being within and through their conversations about classroom practice. We compare the different structural conversational arrangements that are employed when STs provide either positive feedback or raise issues of potential difficulty in relation to their PTs' observed classroom activities. Analysis reveals that STs tend to make evaluative statements when providing positive feedback, in contrast to initiating a process of critical reflection when talking about the need for improvements in PTs' pedagogic practices. We conclude by arguing the need for STs to instigate sustained critical and collaborative professional conversations with their PTs during the practicum experience, enabling them to engage in reflective practice and providing them with opportunities to extend their professional knowledge and skills, thereby potentially improving their future classroom practices.*

## Introduction

This paper examines how the institutional and interactional roles of supervising teachers (hereafter STs) and pre-service teachers (hereafter PTs) are conversationally assembled when STs provide feedback to their PTs during the professional experience component of initial teacher education programs. The professional experience, or 'practicum', is viewed as a critical component of initial teacher education (Grudnoff, 2011; Sim, 2011; Van Velzen,

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Volman, Brekelmans, & White, 2012). Much of PT learning within the professional experience takes place through formal and informal conversations with their STs. It is through such conversations that PTs learn to observe, practise, and refine pedagogical knowledge and skills and to develop their identities as reflective professionals (Ruys, Van Keer, & Aelterman, 2012; White, 2009). STs, on the other hand, are required to participate in a diverse range of practices including planning, modelling practice, mentoring, supporting PTs' entry into the teaching culture, providing feedback, and, ultimately, evaluating and assessing PTs' performance. The role of giving feedback is the particular focus of this paper.

Despite the understanding that within the professional experience 'a large proportion of the work of mentors ... is accomplished through talk' (Strong & Baron, 2004, p. 49), relatively few studies offer systematic and detailed accounts of what that work specifically entails. Similarly, there is a substantial body of literature on issues surrounding the provision of feedback and assessment in the professional experience in schools, but little information about how feedback interactions are collaboratively produced by PTs and STs *in situ*. Studies examining talk between PTs and STs frequently use thematic analyses and case studies to explore how STs offer advice, suggestions, and feedback on PTs' practices (see eg Strong & Baron, 2004; Timperley, 2001). Many studies rely on self-reported descriptions of the supervisory relationships and the ways they accomplish crucial tasks such as the delivery of feedback. Orland-Barak and Klein (2005, p. 386), however, found a 'striking gap' between STs' characterisations of their relationships with PTs and the talk that was produced *in situ*. They concluded that teachers frequently offered an 'idealistic image of their practice' (Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005, p. 392) when asked to report to researchers. Research into actual practices used by STs to provide feedback is thus important for extending our understanding of this complex relationship and the role that STs play in the development of PTs' professional practice.

This paper offers a brief overview of the research literature on interactions between PTs and STs, with a particular focus on the provision of feedback. Drawing on tools from conversation analysis (CA), we identify contrasting patterns of interaction in feedback sessions and explore how these patterns of action are used to organise, direct, and invoke particular professional identities and practices.

## **Review of the literature**

Supervising within a professional experience context has been the topic of much research over the last few decades. Many aspects

have been explored, such as the nature of the relationship between PTs and STs (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Carver & Katz, 2004), the quality of those relationships (Kardos & Johnson, 2010; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009), and whether or not formalised assessment requirements should have a place within the supervisory relationship (Marchant, 2004; Moreton-Cooper & Palmer, 2000). Research conducted by Newell and Connors (2011) points to the importance of the post-observation discussion between university supervisors, STs, and PTs as 'one of the more robust tools for supporting, reinforcing, and reflecting on shared ideas and beliefs... as a key component of program coherence' (p. 229). Among other things, Newell and Connors argue the need for teachers to develop a 'mentoring conversation protocol' to enable PTs to draw the most from the practicum experience. This aligns with Timperley's (2001) recommendation for STs to engage in effective mentoring conversations to promote their PTs' professional development. The University of Houston offers such a protocol (language framework) for use in guiding mentoring conversations, providing STs with specific strategies to support them in accomplishing their mentoring tasks, including the use of 'mediational questions [to] help the colleague *hypothesize* what might happen, *analyze* what worked or didn't, *imagine* possibilities, [and to] *compare* and *contrast* what was planned with what ensued' (University of Houston, 2012, p. 2, emphasis in original). However, while the description of collaborative work offered by this protocol aligns with analysis of the collaborative work undertaken by the STs in our Australian data, the University of Houston protocol does not offer STs any information about when they might select to use collaborative strategies in place of other suggested strategies.

In addition to the work on mentoring and professional experience, there has been a good deal of research into interactions in educational settings (see, for example, the work of Danby & Baker, 1998; Freebody & Freiberg, 2000; Richards, 2006). Conversations within PT supervision have also been the focus of a number of other studies. Using a case study approach, Remington-Smith (2007) analysed PTs' efforts and struggles to negotiate shared instructional plans. The research concluded that 'the ability to have such conversations, in the end, might prove more educative than working toward and from a shared teaching agenda' (p. 103). While Remington-Smith (2007) explored meetings in which power and pedagogy were co-constructed by STs and PTs, Orland-Barak and Klein (2005) revealed how mentoring relationships were co-constructed through supervisory conversations. They found that, although mentoring relationships were, by and large, seen to be collaborative and democratic in intention, they were, however, prescriptive and controlling in actuality.

Despite the research described above, to date there has been little research done in the area of ST-PT conversations that focus on the interactional resources used to co-construct reflection and the provision of feedback regarding professional practice. There are a few notable exceptions. Vasquez (2004), and Vasquez and Reppen (2007) explored conversations between supervising and learner language teachers, concluding that the combination of strategies (eg, positive and negative politeness strategies) used by mentor teachers often resulted in the perception by the PTs that they had received no constructive feedback or advice. Wang, Strong, and Odell (2004) investigated the differences of focus and form in the interactional resources employed by two US and two Chinese mentor-novice teacher pairs. They found differences in the ways in which the participants took advantage of opportunities to engage in mentor-novice interactions, and how, structurally, these differences took form. In her work, Keogh (2010) provided an analysis of a mentor-novice conversation, revealing the interactional co-construction of an asymmetrical mentoring relationship as the participants talk mutually acceptable versions of teachers and their practices into being. Further, Kruijning (2013) demonstrated the ways in which shared understanding is constructed as a practical orientation of the participants, as she analysed teacher dialogue.

For the relationship between STs and PTs to be an educative experience, they must communicate openly, and negotiate their ideas about teaching practices during productive, collaborative, and critically reflective conversations. This paper contributes to the currently limited research on ST and PT talk during the school-based professional experience, focusing specifically on the provision of ST feedback on classroom practice *in situ*.

## **Methodological considerations**

This paper takes an ethnomethodological perspective, examining and observing everyday practices (Garfinkel, 1967). From this stance, the world is viewed as interactively achieved in orderly ways, within and through ongoing conversational practices, as culture in action (Baker, 2000). The task of ethnomethodologists is to investigate the recurrent practices found within members' interactions that talk their common-sense shared institutional worlds into being (Heritage, 1984), thereby searching for and illuminating 'the *machinery*, the *rules*, the *structures* that produce that orderliness' in talk (Psathas, 1995, p. 2, emphasis in original).

Harvey Sacks (1974; 1992) instigated CA as an analytic approach that focuses on the sequential nature of talk to reveal its orderliness. In this paper, we use CA to analyse our data, revealing the conversational devices that the participants use to constitute their institutional roles and relationships, and to make sense of the settings, the people, and the events they encounter within and through their talk.

### **Research method**

During the professional experience, PTs work in close association with their STs to hone, observe, learn, and trial their teaching skills in the classroom. Talk between STs and PTs plays a key role in the school-based practicum experience. As part of a series of professional development (PD) programs, researchers ran hands-on sessions for both new and experienced STs based at an Australian independent girls' school. They audio recorded and transcribed seven meetings between STs and their respective PTs, using CA to investigate the *in situ* interactions within their professional relationships, which were used to inform PTs' future practices (see this issue's Transcription Key, p. 119). In this paper we focus particularly on extracts of talk taken from three of these meetings when the PTs' professional practice is discussed. The meetings were held in the STs' rooms after their PTs had taught lessons in the classroom. Classroom practices were discussed, and the STs provided feedback designed to inform and guide the PTs' future classroom practices as reflective practitioners. In addition to the STs and PTs, a researcher, who audio-recorded the talk that took place, was also present as a silent but overhearing audience to the talk.

### **Data analysis**

The interactions between PTs and their STs from which these sequences are taken could be glossed as 'feedback', through which the teaching practices produced by PTs in the classroom and observed by STs are discussed and evaluated. This institutional context of assessment is a clear display of an asymmetrical relationship between interactants, exemplified by the STs' dual institutional roles as both mentor and evaluator for the PTs. As Maynard (1991) stated in his study of talk in clinical settings, this type of asymmetry 'may have an institutional mooring, but it also has an interactional bedrock' (p. 486). In other words, asymmetrical relationships between these participants are evident in and produced through the *in situ* organisation of the interactions. In the interactions explored in this paper, STs routinely adopt a role of 'shaping' the talk as the only category of interaction participant who initiates topic sequences, sequential shifts, and, frequently, allocates turns. The role of STs, as drivers of interactional sequences, is clearly evident when they are offering positive feedback

to the PT under their supervision. This interactional asymmetry, however, is not simply wielded by the STs. PTs work to collaboratively construct this relationship by supporting and not challenging the ST's role as the 'driver' of the interaction. For example, of the 38 topic sequences identified in these four interactions, PTs initiate only five. In three of these instances, new sequences may initiate a new topic but only do so in response to the ST's questions. In the two other cases, the PTs initiate a new topic sequence by asking their ST a question. In each of these interactions, the STs talk *as* supervising teachers with their PTs. As such, these examples of school talk interactively construct particular common sense and unquestioned versions of the participants' shared but asymmetrical world, working as institutional culture in action (Baker, 2000).

We have identified that preference organisation (Pomerantz, 1984) may influence approaches used by STs to deliver feedback. Positive assessments of PTs' classroom performance are treated by the conversation participants as preferred structures that are delivered without hesitation and received without resistance. Potential critiques of the PTs' behaviour, on the other hand, appear to be marked as dispreferred structures that require more interactional work by all the participants. Our analysis suggests that the additional interactional work that is performed in response to potentially negative feedback creates a context in which collaborative work is more prevalent. Positive evaluations of PTs' practices are routinely offered by STs as a direct assessment. So, for example, in Extracts 1 and 2 (below), the STs assess their PTs' performance without hesitation or hedging, as in Extract 1, when the ST describes the PT's instructions as 'very clear very confident' (line 05), and in lines 176 to 177 (Extract 2) when she describes the PT's knowledge of the subject matter as 'excellent'.

### *Extract 1*

01. ST: Okay (.) um we::ll the first thing that I've got is  
02. the feedback (.) sheet fro:m today's lesso:n,  
03. PT: Hmm hmm  
04. ST: U:::m grea::t (.) instructions at the beginning as  
05. always very clear very confident in front of the  
06. classroom .hh and I thought it (.) was also really  
07. good how you moved arou:nd (.) a lo[t]l  
08. PT: [Y]ep

## Extract 2

168. ST: Ye::s (.) well I think >they've responded really< well (.)  
169. I've got you::r (.) u:m interim report he:re,  
170. PT: ¶Hm mm,  
171. (0.4)  
172. ST: A:nd u:m (.) I'll just go through it with you  
173. PT: ¶Ye::s  
174. ST: So the fi::rst this is just the evaluation sheet (.) the  
175. first one using and developing professional knowledge  
176. (0.6) I thought that your knowledge on the subject area was  
177. excellent  
178. PT: ¶Okay

Analysis also reveals that PTs routinely offer only minimal response tokens to positive evaluations, as highlighted in line 08 of Extract 1. Highly positive evaluations, like 'very clear very confident' (line 05), are routinely offered and received without elaboration. It could be argued that the preference organisation (Pomerantz, 1984) and cultural norms around praise may influence the PTs' use of only minimal response tokens in the receipt of positive feedback for their professional practice. The PTs' lack of elaboration and relative lack of self-selected turns in these interactions, however, could also be seen as indicative of the asymmetrical relationship between these participants. Potentially negative feedback in these interactions is delivered and received quite differently from positive feedback. Extracts 1 and 2 provide examples of the smooth production of positive assessments of PTs' practice in the professional experience. In contrast, Extract 3 (below) provides an example in which the ST asks her PT a question that seems to stem from a possible critique of the lesson that the PT has given. In raising this potentially negative topic, the ST appears to encourage the PT to participate more actively in the discussion.

## Extract 3

09. ST: As I've said the:re .hh u::m just a couple of things (.)  
10. the wa:y that the tables are set up in our room at the  
11. moment for the trial makes it rea[lly](.)=  
12. PT: [Mm ]  
13. ST: =difficu:lt because the girls are  
14. [doing group work ]  
15. PT: [>with their backs](.) fa:ced to me,  
16. [ah ha ] [yeah]  
17. ST: [That's right] [ye:s] (.) so (.) what I wanted to ask you  
18. was actually to do with behaviour management and tha(h)t  
19. [wa::s] (.) in that kind of situation how do you=  
20. PT: [Yes ]  
21. ST: =think perhaps you could work with the gi::rls (.)  
22. especially who are sitting (.) on the ri::ght,



23. PT: Yep  
 24. ST: u:m in trying to get them to stay focused with you because  
 25. they had their [back turned]  
 26. PT: [Yeah I found] that and that's something  
 27. that I no:ted down as well (.) um when I was doing my  
 28. reflection:ns,  
 29. ST: Mm mm  
 30. PT: but (.) I thought (.) what I would do differentl:y, is  
 31. rather than just saying eyes to me: actually get them to  
 32. switch their chai:r, (.) [u:m]((coughs))=  
 33. ST: [Yes]  
 34. PT: =facing the front, and to say o:kay (.) um (0.8) yeah just  
 35. Turn around while I'm giving instru:ctions or

The longer example offered in Extract 3 provides a contrast to the previous two Extracts. It is notable that in Extract 3 (which continues on from Extract 1 and takes place in the early stages of a feedback session) the ST does not offer the PT any explicit assessment or feedback on her classroom performance. Unlike the direct positive assessments offered in Extracts 1 and 2, the ST prefaces her next turn with the statement 'just a couple of things' (line 9) and a comment about the difficulties associated with the placement of the tables in the room. The ST's talk in lines 09 to 11, 17 to 19, 21 to 22, and 24 to 25 is also marked by hedging (Pomerantz, 1984). The hedging in this case is seen as an extended preface sequences, such as 'what I wanted to ask you was actually to do with...' (lines 17–18).

In line 15 of Extract 3, the PT self-selects to propose a collaborative completion to the ST's statement explaining why the room arrangement may create difficulty. This collaborative completion 'with their backs faced to me' (line 15) is somewhat different from the reason offered in overlap by the ST 'doing group work' (line 14). Nevertheless, the PT's collaborative completion is accepted by the ST as an appropriate reason for why the table set-up may create difficulty. It is notable that the ST does not offer a minimal response to accept the PT's contribution in this instance. The collaborative completion is positively accepted and assessed in line 17 ('that's right'), and is adopted by the ST as a potentially difficult classroom scenario (line 25).

The ST's description of the difficulty associated with the placement of tables in the classroom seems to function as a preface to the question that she 'wanted to ask' (line 17) the PT, which was how she felt she could work with a particular group of girls in that classroom setting. While the ST's preface ostensibly suggests that the furniture arrangement and students having 'their back turned' (line 25) is the issue at hand, the question indicating and being received by the PT appears to be a request to talk about behaviour management in the classroom. In particular, the ST asks the PT how she would keep 'the

girls especially who are sitting on the right' (lines 21–22) focused in this 'difficult' classroom arrangement. By making reference to a specific group of girls, the design of the ST's question suggests that this request to talk about behaviour management is precipitated by an actual event in the classroom. The PT's response, 'Yeah I found that and that's something that I noted down as well' (lines 26 to 27), supports the notion that these participants are not talking about hypothetical troubles with classroom furniture arrangements, but are discussing a particular incident in which the PT had not been able to 'get them [the students] to stay focused with you because they had their back turned' (lines 24 to 25).

Requests for PTs to discuss how they 'could work' with students in a particular scenario or how they 'feel' about specific aspects of their professional experience are regularly used by STs to raise potentially sensitive issues. In Extract 3, rather than offering feedback on the PT's behaviour management, the ST presents a scenario in which the classroom furnishings make 'it really difficult' (lines 11 and 13) and poses a question as to how the PT might 'work with the girls' (line 21). While the wording of ST's question does not in itself suggest a negative assessment of the PT's practice, the delicacy with which the ST is approaching this issue is clearly evident. The ST's question is not only extended by a long preface, her turns in asking the question also seeming to be extended by hedges such as 'actually' (line 18) and asking if the PT would describe how 'perhaps you could work with' (line 21) these students. The PT is not, at any stage, asked outright about how she might solve the issue but is, rather, asked if she might discuss 'behaviour management and ... that kind of situation' in lines 18 to 19. As such, rather than directly offering feedback or an assessment, the ST hands the floor to the PT so that she can discuss this potential issue. As such, the ST requests further exploration but does not substantially engage in a discussion of the potential issue.

The pattern of using prefaces, hedges and, ultimately, handing the floor to the PT has been identified in each feedback session where potentially negative topics are raised. This approach requires PTs to move away from their role as recipient of information, offering only minimal responses to the STs' feedback, as we have seen in Extracts 1 and 2, and discuss their own practice. In response to the ST's question (lines 21 to 22) in Extract 3, the PT commences an extended turn (lines 26 to 28, 30 to 32 and 34 to 35) in which she acknowledges and claims prior knowledge of the potential issue and proposes an alternative approach to managing the situation. It is interesting to note that the turn taking structure in the interaction appears to have been

switched. When responding to the ST's question, the PT holds the floor for extended turns while the ST offers only minimal responses (lines 29 and 33). The PT continues to hold the floor in this way until the ST self-selects and collaborates with the PT's alternative scenario (line 46 not shown).

Although this turn taking structure differs markedly from the allocation of turns in Extracts 1 and 2, where STs hold the floor while PTs offer minimal responses, the asymmetry of participants is still evident in Extract 3. The only time that the PT self-selects is when she offers a collaborative completion of the ST's statement about issues in the classroom (lines 15 to 16). The PT in Extract 3 produces minimal responses (lines 12, 20, and 23) that function as continuers while the ST is asking her question. It is only after the ST has asked a question, handing the PT the floor, that the PT takes an extended turn. This pattern has been regularly identified in other feedback sessions involving PTs and STs included in the entire data cohort. It seems that PTs do not routinely provide any elaboration or additional information for the interaction unless there is a request to do so by the ST. Such requests for further information by the ST typically occur in situations like those in Extract 3, when STs ask PTs for their responses to possible issues. In all but one instance in the five feedback sessions in this data corpus, the PTs offer extended responses to their STs' questions that continue until the STs self-select to collaborate or close the topic sequence. While the turn-taking structure following the ST's question in Extract 3 is different from that seen in Extracts 1 and 2, the ST is still driving the interaction.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In these interactions, the participants have been found to collaboratively produce exchanges that were highly directed by the STs. PTs generally do not take the opportunity to collaborate further than accepting and confirming positive feedback. In contrast, the patterns of interaction that we have identified in the delivery of feedback that raises potential issues with PTs' professional practices suggest that this asymmetrical relationship may involve significant complexity. These delicate interactions are driven by STs, who produce requests for substantial input by the PTs. It seems, when raising potential issues in this way, that the STs initiate a process through which PTs are asked not only to respond to but also to assess and reflect on their own classroom practices. In such potentially delicate cases, STs drive a more collaborative feedback approach in the form of pedagogic talk that works to encourage PTs to engage in critical reflection, rather than merely making evaluative statements about PTs' practices. PT

learning may benefit from the use of a similar ST strategy when providing positive feedback, thereby encouraging increased critical and collaborative PT reflection and providing further opportunities for PTs to extend their professional knowledge and skills, thereby potentially improving their future classroom practices.

The particular patterns of talk identified above are repeated across all the feedback sessions included in this particular data cohort. Based on our findings, we recommend the need for further examples of practicum feedback talk to be collected and analysed to investigate whether this conversational structure is representative of all or many such feedback meetings, or whether they are merely idiosyncratic to our current limited but rich data collection. Furthermore, findings emerging from research of this type will be important in illuminating the advantages of using a more consistent and collaborative approach to feedback conversations than was evidenced in our data, in keeping with suggestions of the need for a language framework protocol for use in guiding mentoring conversations (Timperley, 2001; University of Houston, 2012). We conclude this paper by arguing the need for such extended findings to maximise the productiveness of the practicum experience, enabling STs and PTs to gain more benefit from the practicum supervisory relationship than may currently be the case. Further, we believe that employing other analytic inquiries, such as Membership Categorisation Analysis, will further reveal the delicate and important work being undertaken in the seemingly routine work of professional reflection about teacherly practices.

Our analysis has identified some of the ways in which STs and PTs engage in asymmetrical positive evaluations in contrast to more collaborative reflective practices that are evidenced in less favourable feedback talk. These interactions highlight the complexity of the supervisory relationship in the professional experience component of teacher education courses. This type of detailed analysis of the *in situ* practices of STs and PTs has offered a potentially fruitful approach to unravelling this complexity.

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