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Practices of multidisciplinary collaborative work: Wiki document as a boundary object

This paper discusses multidisciplinary collaborative work in a research group. In order to achieve their objectives, the participants of the group engage in collaborative problem solving and meaning-making in a semiotically rich environment. In focus here is a case study of a joint production of a research paper. It is shown how a wiki document emerges as a boundary object in interaction between the participants, and how the wiki document brings together several discourses and sites of engagement across multiple timescales. The research approach is based on nexus analysis. The analysis of situated face-to-face interaction is combined with an analysis of macro-level discourses that observably relate to the situation. In addition to the video recordings of social interaction, multiple longitudinal data from the group's work form the resource of materials drawn on in the research.

Keywords: boundary object, multidisciplinary, nexus analysis, resemiotization, social interaction, video analysis

1 Introduction

This paper deals with the work practices of a multidisciplinary research group. In order to achieve their objectives, the participants of the research group engage in collaborative problem solving and meaning making in semiotically rich environments where face-to-face meetings overlap and mesh with meetings and documents worked on collaboratively over email and in different types of social media. Multiple longitudinal data from these encounters form the resource of materials drawn on in the research. For this paper, one meeting relating to a joint production of a research paper has been chosen as a starting point of the analysis. The meeting is one among many others with different foci and different combinations of participants. Our objective is to examine the practices of collaborative work in this meeting by focusing on the social actions that the participants are engaged in. The analysis of situated face-to-face interaction is combined with the analysis of macro-level discourses that observably relate to the situation. As a result, it is shown how a wiki document emerges as a boundary object in interaction between the participants during the session.

The group members have reported that there is a consistent aim within the group to try to move past superficial collaboration towards genuine multidisciplinary collaboration. Such an approach to collaboration resonates with the concept of authentic participation, where participation in meaningful activities may be used in promoting change in the current state of affairs (Hart 1997, Middleton 1998). One of the longer-term aims of our research on multidisciplinary collaboration within this group is to try to identify actions and activities that promote such positive change. Nexus analysis, which will be discussed in the next section, provides the general framework for these efforts.

2 Nexus analysis

Nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon 2004) provides a fruitful framework for examining multidisciplinary work on a long-term basis as it allows combining the micro-level analysis of *in situ* (inter)action with spatially and temporally

more distant discourses. Nexus analysis proceeds through the cycles of engaging, navigating and changing. The researcher first becomes attached to the community being researched, navigates for answers through different kinds of data and methods (e.g. discourse and interaction analysis), and, throughout this process, participates in the practices of the community being examined, thus contributing to its change. Social action is always mediated (Scollon 2001: 8; Wertsch 1991: 18, 1998: 208; Vygotsky 1978), and it is seen as the intersection of a historical body (Nishida 1958), an interaction order (Goffman 1971) and discourses in place. A historical body entails the history of personal experience and interaction order the possible arrangements by which we form relationships in social interactions. All social action is situated in time and place where discourses meet (Scollon & Scollon 2003: 2).

Though there is some previous nexus-analytic research on multilingualism and language contact from the sociolinguistic perspective (see the recent special issue of *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2010), video-based empirical studies relying on conversational data have not yet been common. However, Raudaskoski (2010) uses nexus analysis to analyze a phone call from an adoption agency to a couple expecting to become adoptive parents. The phone call was part of a Danish TV documentary on adoption, during which the couple is informed about their future adoptive child. Raudaskoski shows how the phone call forms an instance of family making as it emerges in the course of the call, involving different discourses of place, and invoking histories of personal experience and displays of affect. Raudaskoski further shows how, during the phone call, the identity of a couple waiting to become adoptive parents, as well as that of the baby, are “negotiated and constituted *in situ*” (2010: 431). This embodied and material process is mediated by the use of different cultural resources. This paper provides further observations on how relevant social actions emerge in situated face-to-face interaction, and how they relate to spatially and temporally more distant discourses.

As De Saint-Georges (2005: 155) puts it, focus on trajectories has come to be an important component of nexus analyses. This involves an interest in conceptualizing how social realities are constituted across time and spaces,

and how events, people, ideas, objects and knowledge evolve over time. In this study, we will examine these trajectories through our data from one point in time.

Further, Iedema (2001: 23; 2003: 41) employs the notion of *resemiotization* to describe how meaning making transforms from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next, thus, gaining more institutional weight. De Saint-Georges (2005: 156) suggests that in social action, numerous trajectories intersect and the longitudinal development can be viewed as making progress along a timeline through successive space/time stations, that is, landmark events or sites of engagement. These events are preceded by anticipatory actions and discourses, for example in the case of the research group being studied, in their planning activities for subsequent phases in the research process.

Scollon (2007) uses the notion of *boundary object* (originally from Star & Griesemer 1989, later developed further in Wenger 1998, for example) for an object, abstract or concrete, that functions as a connecting link or bridge across two very separate systems. Scollon (2007: 14) gives an example of how an Alaskan hunter's everyday tool, a rifle gun, functions as a boundary object that relates an individual hunter's hunting practices to the fur trading economy. Star and Griesemer (1989: 393) suggest that the creation and management of boundary objects is essential in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds. A false linkage may, however, be set up by the use of a particular word to make reference to objects in different geographies of discourse (Scollon 2007). As Scollon (2007: 14–15) explains, even though the word *gun* can be used in relation to both hunting in Alaska and gun-related crime in London, these are two different uses, and as boundary objects they have separate geographies of discourse. However, Bechky (2003: 326) views transformation of local understandings as vital to effective knowledge sharing in organizations even if the development, use and influence of boundary objects has not been fully understood. While objects can be used to create shared understanding, they may also serve as a constraint, for example, in legitimizing work or in maintaining and challenging occupational control over task areas. However, as Kimble, Grenier &

Goglio-Primard (2010: 442) put it, boundary objects are channels through which epistemically distinct groups can communicate and collaborate. They may also be used as resources for transforming social identities.

In the following, the research setting will be described in more detail, and the data will be analysed both from the micro- and the macro-level perspectives. The entry point to the analysis of social action in our data is that of interaction order which is approached with the tools of conversation analysis.

3 Multidisciplinary collaborative work

This study concentrates on examining the work practices of a group of researchers. The general context of their multidisciplinary collaborative work is the academic workplace. The group's practices of joint meaning making, established through collaboration and participation, are in particular focus. We also examine the role of technology and other semiotic resources (documents, email, etc.) in multidisciplinary collaborative work. The setting is thus something that could be described as institutional, while the occasions where video-recorded data have been obtained could be called meetings. When the data were examined in more detail, it nevertheless soon became clear that the participants did not orient to the occasions as official meetings. They also called them *palaveri*, which roughly translates as a meeting but does not refer to the most formal types of gatherings. There was no pre-defined agenda, and no-one acted as the chair person. Topics were jointly decided, and anyone could direct discussion back to the task at hand, if necessary. However, the participants had a shared professional task that they attempted to solve, which is one recurrent feature of institutional interaction (Drew & Heritage 1992: 22).

Conversation analysis is here used to gain an understanding of how actions and activities emerge and are carried out in situated social interaction. Following Goodwin (2007), the interactive organization of human action is seen to include the following characteristic features: it involves multi-party embodied participation frameworks, where the participants orient to phenomena and material objects in the environment that they find relevant

for the task at hand (e.g. working on a presentation, driving a car). Shared orientation to certain issues also involves the production of linguistic and embodied categorizations of those phenomena and structure in the environment, often mediated by the use of tools (e.g. computers). These embodied and linguistic productions are sequentially organized into coherent courses of action, such as making a suggestion about the appropriate route, or seeking advice from the recipient on how to use a tool. In the context of 'learning' the participants may also include more and less experienced members in the task at hand (see Lave & Wenger 1991: 67, Wenger 1998: 13).

Previous research on social (inter)action in the workplace has demonstrated how participants co-ordinate a range of work-relevant tasks in technologically-rich environments (see e.g. Engeström & Middleton 1998; Goodwin 1996; Heath & Luff 1992; Nevile 2004). It has been shown how co-workers frequently engage in publicly enacted actions and activities that enable the timely progress of the joint work-activity. Such activities are examined in the next section in connection with a wiki document, which emerges as a boundary object that both mediates the group members' participation in the ongoing activity and becomes the topic of talk in itself. It is argued that the wiki document functions as a nexus for multiple discourses, involving varying timescales.

4 Case study: Wiki document as a boundary object

In the data discussed in this paper, the participants have come together to work on a joint research paper. In examining the video recordings, recurrent task-related actions begin to emerge from interaction. Those that directly concern research include talk about how to utilize previous research, for example, by sharing information about relevant materials and methodology. The group also jointly examines and analyzes the data. Also meta-level talk about how to use the various tools of research, what to include in the research paper, and how to organize the joint production of the paper in terms of scheduling and division of responsibilities is prevalent. In the data extracts examined in more detail below, the discussion centers on deciding on an appropriate venue for the publication of the research findings. In

relation to this, it becomes relevant to find information about appropriate conferences and journals.

The conversation includes five participants from different disciplines. Anna is a PhD student, while the remaining four are researchers and lecturers with doctorates. Throughout the extract, Katariina is using a computer whose screen is displayed on the wall with a projector. All original names have been changed. The transcription conventions are presented in Appendix A. The extracts follow each other in the order that they are presented. Lines are consecutively numbered; a few lines between the extracts are omitted, typically including silence or other smaller turns.

Example (1) opens the discussion on an appropriate forum for the publication of the findings.

(1) Forum

- 01 MINEA: Tuota (.) pitäiskö meidän miettiä sitä foorumia.
Well should we think about the forum
- 02 Tuli vaan mieleen onks meillä joku social (.) blogi of technology
I just thought, do we have some social blog of technology
- 03 (.) vai mikä (0.9) semmonen lehti
or some (0.9) that kind of journal
- 04 (5.0)
- 05 JUTTA: .hh Tota:
Well
- 06 (0.6)
- 07 MINEA: Ei.
No
- 08 KATARIINA: Nyt ku me oltais [fiksu]ja niin me yritettäis tietysti-
Now if we were smart, we would try of course
- 09 TAINA: [(Emmää tiiä)
(I don't know)
- 10 MINEA: [Social studies of technology tai
Social studies of technology or
- 11 joku tämmönen.
some such
- 12 KATARIINA: katt- myö katottas tietysti tuolta meidän wi- tuolta ~laitoksen
wikistä.
we would take a look at our wi- department's wiki
- 13 TAINA: mheh heh heh
- 14 MINEA: No katsotaan heh.
Well let's take a look.
- 15 KATARIINA: [(-) missä meidän pitäis julkaista.
(-) where we should publish

Minea's turn on lines 1–3 moves the meeting agenda forward, towards planning the future of the paper project. Prior to the extract, the participants have analyzed the data included in their research. Minea suggests that they start considering a possible forum for publishing the paper (line 1). Her turn also includes a tentative suggestion to offer the paper to a journal whose name she cannot quite recall (lines 2–3, see also lines 10–11). This change on the agenda and suggestion about the journal is not immediately received with acceptance, which is indicated by the long silence (line 4) and Jutta's hesitation marker *Tota* ('well') (line 5). Katariina, however, accepts the topic by suggesting that they look for information about possible forums for publication that are listed in the department's wiki (lines 8, 12). Minea accepts the suggestion (line 14).

In the first extract the boundary object wiki is introduced into the interaction. It is offered as a solution regarding where to find information about an appropriate forum and how to decide what it would be (*missä meidän pitäis julkaista* 'where we should publish', line 15). In fact, Minea's turn on lines 1–3 has also included a suggestion, albeit rather an indirect one, that they should publish their results in a journal. It is this aspect that Jutta takes up in more detail in the next extract.

(2) Wiki document

- 19 JUTTA: *Tota, (.) mää lähtisin ehkä konferenssista [liikkeelle.
Well I would perhaps start with a conference.*
- 20 KATARIINA: [Mm.
- 21 JUTTA: [Ei mun mielest (.) meidän kannata nyt ekana johonkin
I don't think we should first try some
- 22 MINEA: [Mm.
- 23 JUTTA: [journaaliin.
journal
- 24 MINEA: [No katopa sieltä X laitoksen wikistä.
Well take a look at X department's wiki.
- 25 (0.6)
- 26 JUTTA: Ei siellä oo nimittäin- (.) Semmosiin lehtiin [niin ei oo-
Because there aren't any- Those kinds of journals aren't-
- 27 TAINA: [Onko se julkinen wiki.
Is it a publicly open wiki
- 28 (0.4)
- 29 TAINA: Vai suljet[tu.
Or closed

- 30 JUTTA: [Ei. [Suljettu.
No. Closed
- 31 MINEA: [Suljettu.
Closed
- 32 TAINA: Mm.

Jutta is of the opinion that they should offer the paper to some conference, rather than to a journal (lines 19, 21, 23). Her turn includes a rather strong stance display, and as a whole it contradicts Minea's earlier suggestion. However, Jutta's turn is not responded to directly, as Minea prompts Katariina (who is at the computer) to take a look at the wiki website (line 24) rather than engaging in a direct discussion about the forum. The wiki document thus mediates the participants' interaction. It is offered as a means that holds the resolution to the issue. Again, Jutta calls into question Minea's suggestion, saying *Ei siellä oo nimittäin- (.) Semmosiin lehtiin [niin ei oo-* ('Because there aren't any- Those kinds of journals aren't-') (line 26), which seems to suggest that the wiki document will not include useful information. She has not yet finished her turn, however, when Taina latches on, requesting more information about the wiki website by asking *Onko se julkinen wiki*. (Is it a publicly open wiki) (line 27). As it turns out, the department's wiki is a semi-private website, accessible only to those who have been included in the list of allowed users (lines 30, 31). It is becoming clear that the wiki website has multiple roles in the group's work, ranging from a source of information to a gatekeeper. In the last extract the discussion focuses on the consequences of the wiki document.

(3) Travel expenses

- 35 JUTTA: .hh Mun mielestä se pitäis olla julkaistavissa tää
I think this thing should be publishable
- 36 juttu niinku missä tahansa (.) mejän konffassa
in any of our conferences
- 37 tai lehdessä jonne laadullinen tutkimus muutenkin (.) uppoo.
or journals where qualitative research is published anyway
- 38 (4.3)
- 39 JUTTA: Mut sitte on olemassa nää (0.4) social shaping, social construc
tion of
- 40 *But then there are these social shaping, social construction of*
technology tyypiset konferenssit? .hh mutta ne on semmosii

- 41 *technology type conferences but they are rather*
 kyseenalaisia että [emmää niinku ~Annaa neuvos (0.2)
questionable so that I wouldn't advise ~Anna,
- 42 ANNA: [Mm.
- 43 JUTTA: [väikkärin jos meinaa tehdä niin
if one plans to write a dissertation
- 44 ANNA: [Mm.
- 45 JUTTA: (0.5) ei kannata (.) lähtee niist liikkeelle se-.
those are not the ones that one should start with, it-
- 46 (0.9)
- 47 JUTTA: Laitos ei maksa matkoja niihin hehehehe (.) [vaikka ne
The department will not pay the travel expenses to those even though
- 48 ?: [heh
- 49 JUTTA: äärimmäisen kiinnostavia onki.
they are extremely interesting
- ((9 lines omitted))
- 59 TAINA: Siis laitos ei maksa mat- matkoja niin mitä siis
So the department will not pay the travel expenses, what
- 60 se ei ole oikein niinku ydinaluetta vai.
it does not belong to the focus areas or
- 61 (.)
- 62 JUTTA: Mm:: niihin yleensä hyväksytään abstraktin perusteella
You usually get accepted to them based on an abstract
- 63 MINEA [(Panepa) uudestaan.
(Show) again
- 64 JUTTA: ja laitos ei maksa yleensä ku näitä full paper-
and the department will usually only pay these full paper-
- 65 TAINA: Ai niin joo joo aivan.
Oh yeah, okay, okay, right.

Jutta's first long turn on lines 35–49 includes several actions. It begins with a stanced statement about their work: in Jutta's opinion their research should be publishable in any forum that they decide (lines 35–37). Some of these forums, however, are judged to be questionable (line 39–41), especially if one intends to include the paper in one's dissertation (lines 41–45). Anna, the graduate student, is the first author, and thereby largely responsible for the paper. Advice giving and apprenticeship mesh here with justifications for an appropriate forum. That the department will not pay travel expenses for attending certain conferences is given as a reason for not recommending participation in them (lines 47, 49). This aspect is further topicalized as Taina requests information about this principle (lines 59–60), suggesting that the

marginal status of the conferences in terms of the department's research focus is the reason for not paying the travel expenses (line 60). This is not confirmed to be the case, however, but the fact that an abstract does not qualify as a sufficient contribution for the department, that is, it is only so called full papers that are financially supported (lines 62, 64).

The interaction within the group has produced several selection criteria for how to decide on an appropriate forum for their work. It has become evident that the forum should have an appropriate theme and focus, be highly enough recognized on the basis of conference /journal ranking lists, and lastly, be also acceptable for the participants' home department (e.g. only full papers are financed). The emergence of these criteria has been facilitated by the fact that not all of the participants come from the same department, and not all of them share the same historical body in terms of experience in doing research. At the same time, as the extracts above illustrate, there is room for discussion also among those members who do share a similar background and experience. It is often the case that such underlying assumptions are not openly discussed as they are assumed to be shared (see Engeström 1999: 385). Multidisciplinary collaborative work enables such themes to surface into the open, which also offers a beneficial ground for initiation into the local 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) of doing research.

In the extracts above, the participants' interests are divided between talk about an appropriate forum and where to find information about available forums. As such, a wiki document comes to function as a boundary object on which layers of discourses observably accumulate. At the group level, the wiki document is a part of research discourse and used as a basis for evaluating where to publish and what the possible audience for the paper would be through this decision. At the same time, discourses relating to the departmental governance are also involved. The contents of the wiki have been formed at the department through a joint process, during which conferences have been ranked. As a result, participation in some conferences is encouraged, and travel expenses are compensated for, provided that participation is based on a full paper. Academic professionalism within this academic context equals knowing about the list and knowing how to use it.

There are also university-level regulatory discourses that the wiki document mediates. Such discourses promote interdisciplinary co-operation and multidisciplinary, as evidenced for example by the large-scale university reform that Finnish universities have undergone in the past few years. Also different types of strategy papers are involved, emphasizing the importance of collaboration across disciplines (e.g. Academy of Finland 2006: 13). Nowadays university funding in Finland is directly affected by the number of publications in sufficiently high-ranking forums, and therefore documents such as the wiki provide guidelines for researchers in their daily work. However, as the data show, not all of the participants have equal access to the wiki document, which may provide some constraints for conducting multidisciplinary work (cf. Bechky 2003).

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed how a wiki document emerges as a nexus of practice in the work of a multidisciplinary research group. The wiki functions as a boundary object, which joins together several discourses and sites of engagement across multiple timescales. Each time it is brought to mediate the group's work, it provides the participants with a new space/time station and contributes to the resemiotization process of the multidisciplinary effort (including the paper itself, and the issues surrounding the collaboration). These moments, as they emerge in interaction, serve as important landmark events for the group, supporting the meaning and decision making processes in the course of the joint production of a research paper. As such, the boundary object helps to create locally shared understandings and advances the multidisciplinary collaborative work.

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Appendix A.

Transcription symbols

Symbols are based on Jefferson (2004).

wo[rd	onset of overlapping talk or action
(0.8)	silence in tenth of seconds
(.)	micropause, silence less than 0.2 seconds
<u>word</u>	emphasis
wor-	cut-off word
hh	outbreath
.hh	inbreath
>word<	talk quicker in tempo than surrounding talk
<word>	talk slower in tempo than surrounding talk
WORD	talk louder than surrounding talk
°word°	talk softer than surrounding talk
wo::rd	extension of a sound
w(h)ord	word produced through laughter
word.	downwards intonation
word?	upwards intonation
word,	continuing intonation
↑word	shift to talk high in pitch
↓word	shift to talk low in pitch
£word£	smiley voice
(word)	word in doubt
(-)	unclear word
~word	name changed
((words))	transcriber's comments