Learning in contexts. Four cases in higher education.

Bannink, E.A.

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5 RECONTEXTUALIZING MICRO-TEACHING

5.1 Introduction

In order to become a good teacher one already has to be one - the paradox applies not only to teacher education but to all professional training and development programs that involve the public performance of a social role. When student teachers embark on their teaching practice they tend to be confounded by the sheer multiplicity of things that go on simultaneously in classroom situations, and that demand their attention – if not action. As ‘the teacher’ they are held accountable for what happens there; as novices, they cannot be blamed for not being able to cope. As ‘the teacher’ they are supposed to teach – and teach well; as novices, much of their energy and attention inevitably goes into the ‘noise’ of classroom multiparty situations, both in the literal sense and in terms of the signal-noise metaphor that is used in experimental physics: the lesson ‘signal’ is likely to get ‘drowned’. In order to prepare student teachers for these complex situations, the need was felt for training activities that make the tasks of the beginning teacher more transparent and manageable, while leaving intact some of the ‘authenticity’ of classroom multi-party settings. Various techniques – all involving some form of simulation or staged teaching – have been developed that address precisely this mismatch between the ‘cold’ mastery of professional teaching skills (‘methodology’) and its effective deployment in classroom situations.

In this chapter we take as point of departure a peer-teaching technique that has come to be known as ‘micro-teaching’ and that was developed in the 1960s and 1970s at Stanford University. It was designed to promote ‘transfer’ of specific teaching skills to real-world classroom situations, by practising them in off-record simulated settings. Learning gain was hypothesized at the level of individual teachers (McLeod 1987, Wallace 1991, Metelo 2000). We will describe how a reframing of this peer-teaching technique can raise student teachers’ analytic understanding of the organization of talk in classroom multiparty settings – and of the systematic differences with situations outside school. Its aim was to enable student teachers to develop a more ‘context-
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sensitive' attitude in their professional teaching behavior (McLeod 1987, Wallace 1991, Metelo 2000).

5.2 Micro-teaching: redefining 'the situation'

As mentioned above, micro-teaching as a teacher training technique was developed at Stanford University in the early 1960s. The original format reflected the behaviorist assumptions about learning that were popular at the time, for instance that complex learning tasks could be broken down into more simple 'modules' or specific (sub)skills, which could effectively be trained, given appropriate feedback conditions. It was proposed that the best way to realize this was by having novice teachers imitate 'good' teaching skills modelled by experts. These skills could be conveyed to the student teachers during specific briefings and their behavior would then be 'shaped' until it met the required criterion. The rise of more advanced technology (video-recording) and the possibility to freeze and review particular situated teacher behaviors greatly enhanced the feedback dimension. Thus specific skills could be taught, one at a time. It was hoped that in this way micro-teaching could be employed to achieve increased control of practice: by having novice teachers practise specific 'good' classroom behaviors in interactional settings where 'faults' could be made, noticed and repaired without being consequential in the public social domain – as they are in lessons at school.

According to the initiators at Stanford, micro-teaching is based on five assumptions:

...micro-teaching is real teaching, in which the complexities of normal classroom teaching are lessened, in which there is a focus on training for the accomplishment of specific tasks, which allows for the increased control of practice and which greatly expands the normal knowledge-of-results or feedback dimension.

(Allen & Ryan (1969), cited in MacLeod 1987: 531)

This definition presupposes that micro-teaching is authentic teaching in a setting of reduced complexity (cf. Kieviet, 1972; Wallace, 1991; Metelo 2000). The setting is a 'real' class with 'real' students except that it only addresses a specific task or skill: the 'teach' (Wallace 1991) is a pseudo-lesson that is not contextualized as a 'real' social situation in which default cultural face systems apply. Moreover, the lessons are stripped of all institutional and administrative concerns. Finally, fewer problems with classroom management may be expected since the 'pupils' are peers, or students who have received special instructions how to behave during the event. The situation of 'the teach', therefore, might truly be said to be 'scaled down' (Kieviet 1971) in complexity.
In spite of considerable research efforts, a correlation between micro-teaching-type training activities and student teachers' subsequent performances in the classroom could not be unambiguously established. McLeod concludes in an overview of these research activities and designs: 'Results accumulated but understanding did not' (1987: 538). Research interest dwindled in the 1980s, but this did not prevent micro-teaching from remaining firmly established in teacher education programs all over the world. However, it is generally recognized that direct transfer to 'real' classroom teaching is problematic (cf. Couzijn 1995).

The rise of a more cognitivist orientation towards teacher education has yielded different objectives of micro-teaching activities, in accordance with the new paradigm:

A cognitive model of micro-teaching, emphasizing participants' thinking about their teaching ... [suggests] that micro-teaching should be viewed as a procedure facilitating long-term changes in student-teachers' thinking about teaching rather than short-term changes in their teaching behavior.

(MacLeod 1987: 537)

This means a shift in focus: student teachers' micro-teaching behaviors are analyzed not only in terms of predetermined observational categories, but in terms of students' underlying conceptual systems or schemata. Teaching skills – or the lack of them – are thus reconceptualized as resulting from 'ways of thinking' rather than discrete 'ways of behaving' (MacLeod & McIntyre 1977). From that perspective micro-teaching may be used as a technique for reflecting on aspects of one's professional behavior rather than simply as a technique for shaping that behavior.

In this chapter we will present a detailed description of a series of micro-teaching activities that was developed and refined over the years in the introductory phase ('eerste fase') of the professional teacher education curriculum at the University of Amsterdam. They revolve around a peer-teaching episode not unlike that of the 'classic' micro-teaching 'teach' in that one student teaches a mini-lesson with the others acting as 'the students', and in that it is recorded on video and evaluated in class and thus is supposed to 'greatly expand the feedback dimension' (McLeod 1987: 531). The 'model' we present is not unlike the cognitive model that MacLeod and McIntyre (1977) have proposed, in that it shares their assumption that micro-teaching activities can be fruitfully used as an instrument of reflection in teacher education. However, its location in the programme and the way it is bracketed in prior and subsequent activities and participant roles, reflect a difference in underlying assumptions. With McLeod we hold that we need to understand the complexity of micro-teaching situations in order to decide whether and how 'transfer' can take place to 'real' classroom situations.
5.3 Micro-teaching: a discourse approach

While it is certainly true that micro-teaching situations are ‘reduced in complexity’ in some important respects (see previous section), it must also be recognized that they have an added complexity all their own. The ‘teach’ constructs a kind of ‘game domain’: a lesson within a lesson about lessons – that is one in a series of others of its kind. As such it is ‘one moment in a diachronic chain of discourses, a moment which presumes earlier moments and in which later moments are already envisaged’ (Irvine, 1996: 153). The briefing, the planning and the feedback sessions which bracket it remind us that the ‘task’ domain also constructs a social domain, with shifting and complex roles for participants. Most (all?, some?) of the student teachers will be ‘the teacher’ in a ‘next session’ in which they will be evaluated by the very peers they are now evaluating. The effectiveness of the ‘greatly enhanced feedback dimension’ crucially hinges on the degree to which participants are able and willing to negotiate the conflicting demands of the ‘task’ and ‘social’ contexts of the micro-teaching situation along the axis of solidarity and deference (Scollon & Scollon 1995). Competitiveness or anxiety about one’s performance may negatively affect the feedback dimension: reflection is likely to address here-and-now reactions from peers rather than future classroom occasions.

Whereas MacLeod & McIntyre assume a learning path from personal theories of teaching to actual classroom situations (‘Students conceptual schemata to a large extent control their teaching behavior; changes in teacher behavior result from changes in schemata’; 1977: 131; quoted in McGarvey & Swallow 1986) we argue that these schemata are to a large extent shared among student teacher populations. They address systematic features of classroom multiparty interactions and other educational encounters. Micro-teaching then, if reframed as ‘joint practice’, may enhance students’ awareness of these interactional issues and their shared cultural basis. To achieve this we have made the preparation phase accessible for investigation, by adding an extra frame: the reports on the lesson planning we ask the participants to write, in which cultural propositions on teaching and teacher and learner roles come to the surface.

The theoretical perspective of this study is ethnographic and discourse-based, in the sense that it emphasizes that what people say and do is to be interpreted in the situation of the utterance. We do not anticipate what will happen during ‘the teach’ or predetermine what are relevant behaviors and observation categories. They will emerge as culturally-shared ‘opinions’ and ‘behaviors’ that the participants themselves remark upon, and that resonate across the various assignments. The investigation, which also addresses nonverbal and prosodic features of talk, strongly
reflects Goffman’s ideas about the complexity of speaker and hearer roles in multi-party settings (Goffman 1974, 1979). They can be articulated and made more transparent in a dynamic discourse framework (Polanyi & Scha 1983; van Dam van Isselt 1993, 1995) that traces how contexts for the interpretation of utterances can change on a moment-by-moment basis. The data and analyses are ‘emic’ in the sense that both the selection and the interpretation of what is relevant is made by insiders (cf. van Lier 1988): student-authored written summaries of group discussions (‘metadata’); episodes in the minilesson that were commented upon by the student teachers involved.

5.4 The data: background information

The micro-teaching episode that yielded the data for this study took place during the second class of an introductory block in an EFL teacher education program. The objectives of the block as a whole (four classes) are the following: 1) to create an open atmosphere in which prospective teachers are not afraid to speak up and share their ideas about what constitutes good or bad teaching (which are often intimately related with their own school experiences); 2) to expand and refine those ideas on the basis of what they hear from others and what they do together in a variety of tasks and assignments; 3) to generate well-defined objectives for the first part of the course (‘half-open curriculum’); and 4) to yield observation categories for their teaching practice.

The micro-teaching assignment is introduced early in the course in order to provide a common learning experience. The nature of the assignment forces the student teachers to cooperate closely and to come to important joint decisions. Its place in the program entails that the students hardly know each other, although some may have met before when attending other university classes. Getting to know each other is the prime objective of the first session. The students are asked to do some pre-course homework: they fill out a questionnaire in which they are invited to make explicit their opinions about general matters concerning the roles and responsibilities of teachers and the school, of teacher-student relations, and issues related to foreign language teaching methodology (the place of grammar, code-switching etc.). During the first session the students briefly introduce themselves to each other and then go off in groups of four to compare and discuss the answers they have given to the questionnaire. They report the outcome of their discussions briefly in plenary. After this they once again split up into groups of four and start preparing a micro-lesson, which will be taught during the second class.

The students are instructed to collectively plan a 15-minute lesson. There are no restrictions on topic or format, but the lesson should be a complete lesson, not part of a
longer lesson. The topic and format should be selected accordingly. Explicitly, the ‘pupils’ (those members of the workgroup who are not teaching) are supposed to be ‘themselves’: they do not role-play or pretend to be first graders or anything like that. The planning group decides who is to be ‘the teacher’ and a brief, written report is made of their negotiations in the group during the planning session: on what grounds did they choose the topic? on what grounds did they choose the teacher? what was the general line of the discussion; what were ‘significant moments’ during the discussion?

On the day of ‘the teach’ the tables and chairs in the classroom are lined up in rows – the default configuration in the conventional classrooms of their teaching practice – but the groups are of course free to change this arrangement. During the ‘teach’ one member of the planning group acts as camera-person; the others act as observers that report on either ‘the teacher’; ‘the students’ or ‘the interaction’. In between the lessons the other students are asked to write down one aspect of the lesson that they thought was really good and one aspect that they thought was less successful. Afterwards there is a brief feedback session, during which parts of the tape can be reviewed on demand.

Three types of data will be analysed:
- the written reports of the group discussions about the preparation of the micro-lessons (data set 1)
- detailed transcripts of the interactions in the ‘teach’ itself (data set 2)
- comments made during the feedback session after the ‘teach’ (data set 3).

5.5 Data set 1. Metadata: the group reports

The students were asked to write a brief report on how the group discussions evolved. Not surprisingly, it turned out that there were recurrent themes that were conspicuously prominent in all four reports. They all address interactional dimensions of roles and tasks in the classroom. We have grouped them under four dimensions: constraints on ‘type of task’; participation and feedback; asymmetrical classroom roles; ‘common ground’ knowledge (Werth 1999).

5.5.1 Dimension 1. Constraints on ‘type of task’

The four group reports show a striking correspondence in the type of task that is considered at the early stages of the negotiations. Initially three out of four groups opted for a non-verbal task that could be performed by all students simultaneously. The following ideas were mentioned:
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(A) A course in mending a flat bicycle tyre was mentioned.
(B) One of the ideas was to do a cooking lesson and to have the students prepare tiramisu.
(C) [We were thinking of] a demonstration: a cooking lesson ... or explaining a game: chess, backgammon ...

What is it about these non-verbal tasks that makes them such an attractive proposition for the ‘teach’? This type of task requires students to act simultaneously according to a set of conventionally agreed procedures. The teacher gives instructions and/or models; each of the students performs the various steps of the procedure individually. The collective lesson floor is split up into as many subfloors as there are students in class. Participation is guaranteed, in the sense that non-participation is immediately obvious. Feedback on the execution of the task can be efficient: in one glance the teacher can encompass every student in the class, and see ‘where they are’ at a particular moment. If anything goes wrong, there is visual information at what stage of the procedure the trouble arose. The source of the trouble can then be identified and negotiated through ‘conversational’ dyadic interactions with individual students that need not affect the activities of the other students. Repair can be immediate and efficient without creating an interruption at the level of class-based activities. It can be ‘finely-tuned’ (cf. recipient design; Sacks & Schegloff 1979) to any individual student’s current information state and level of competence.

Intuitively – probably on the basis of their members’ experience with learning situations at school – the students have identified an important dimension of classroom multi-party interactions. In informal conversational situations out of school, especially (but not exclusively) those that involve only one speaker and one hearer, a lack of understanding usually shows up in the way the addressee performs a ‘next move’ in the context of the ‘game’ currently being played (cf. Wittgenstein 1959; for ‘conversation’, see e.g. Sacks & Schegloff 1979). Misunderstandings or ambiguities show up as ‘wrong moves’ in the talk and can be explicitly addressed and negotiated. In classroom multi-party situations that involve verbal learning tasks students are not supposed to answer back simultaneously: chaos would result. Other ways have to be found to construct feedback on what happens in each student’s head: whether or not students actively participate and/or experience problems of understanding is not immediately obvious in the situation. For ‘learning’ to take place, misunderstandings that arise at the level of individual students must not be allowed to persist. But the teacher can only help to remedy that situation if she is aware that such a situation exists. Therefore, constructing feedback on whether students are actively involved in lesson activities and what it is they do not know or understand, is one of the most important and, at the same time, most difficult dimensions of group-based teaching.
Selecting a nonverbal task that can be individually performed neatly sidesteps the problems with feedback in multi-party situations that are mentioned above. The shift to the visual channel enables the teacher to synchronize the learning and implement an efficient feedback system without creating discontinuities at the level of individual students.

In the end, the reports show, all groups reject the lesson topics they originally had suggested, owing to physical constraints of the situation: the lack of time, or space, or props and attributes.

5.5.2 Dimension 2. Participation and feedback

Active student participation and interaction between teacher and the students in order to realize the feedback dimension remain high on the students’ agenda, even after they have rejected the demonstration-like lesson topics:

(A) [when discussing ‘presenting a book the teacher has read’ as a lesson topic]
   The idea of such a mini-lecture became less and less attractive, because there is no interaction at all and nothing is really taught to the group; it’s just a one-sided transfer of information, and therefore we realized that there is little difference between a lesson and a talk.

(B) [when discussing ‘an introduction to Persian’ as a possible lesson topic]
   We all agree on the topic, although P. remarks it might be hard for the class to participate with such a subject.

(D) [when in doubt whether ‘the constituent parts of a Mass’ is a suitable lesson topic]
   Interaction with the audience is important: they have to react not just listen.

These remarks show that the groups are almost unanimous in believing that a lesson should not consist of a teacher monologue: interaction between teacher and students is considered a crucial condition for learning. The students also share the underlying assumption that in some cases a lesson is just a ritual event in which the teacher does all the talking and the students are not actively involved. Their remarks address the lack of information flow from student to teacher, which makes feedback on what happens in the students’ heads impossible. The characterization ‘one-sided transfer of information’ in the report of group A refers to flat, linear models of communication and learning that are described and criticized in Reddy’s ‘conduit metaphor’ of communication (Reddy 1993). These considerations then point to shared assumptions about the conditions that have to be fulfilled for a lesson to be a success.

Note, however, that group D uses the word ‘audience’ when referring to the class. On the one hand, apparently, interaction with the students is supposed to be important; on
the other, a form of listening behavior is suggested which implicitly frames the teacher as a (solitary) performer and the students as members of an audience ('podium occasions'):

> the role of the audience is to appreciate remarks made, not to reply in any direct way. They are to conjure up what a reply might be, but not utter it; back-channel response alone is what is meant to be available to them.

(Goffman 1981: 138).

5.5.3 Dimension 3. Asymmetrical classroom roles

In the discussions on the choice of lesson topic a third condition is deemed crucial: the *asymmetrical distribution of knowledge* that ritually holds between participants in the role of 'teacher' and those in the role of 'learners' in classroom contexts of talk. Of course the teacher has to know more about the lesson topic than the students do:

(A) [when rejecting 'the analysis of a poem' as a possible lesson topic]
   Not a poem: *of course everybody knows* the basic principles of poetry.

(B) [referring to sexual harassment as a possible lesson topic]
   The only problem is that we know just as much about this sort of topic as the rest of the class, which means that *it won't be a real lesson*, but rather a discussion.

(C) [while discussing 'mending a flat tyre' as a possible lesson topic]
   That's how we got the idea to select a 'technological' topic: we were dealing with 'alphas', *who are more likely to learn* from a more 'technical' topic.

(D) [while discussing the theory of music as a possible lesson topic]
   An advantage of this topic is that most people will find it interesting but at the same time they will *know little to nothing about it*.

In the reports the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge between teacher and students is mentioned as a constraint on or necessary condition for what qualifies as a suitable lesson topic. Group B explicitly mentions its fears that the more symmetrical distribution of roles and organization of turns at talk that obtain in a 'discussion' will overrule the teacher's authority. The teacher's ritual right to dominate the floor and 'have the final word' will have to be respected. Clearly, a lesson is considered a ritual game with a fixed, asymmetrical distribution of roles and obligations. Conversational, egalitarian rights to the floor are temporarily reduced. The teacher is the expert. In order to make 'learning' visible, it is best that the students should know next to nothing about the subject.
5.5.4 Dimension 4. Shared cultural knowledge

At the same time, however, other constraints seem to be in force: the students should also be partially competent or at least interested in the topic under consideration.

(A) [when discussing the merits of ‘writing a letter of application’ as a possible lesson topic]
   Such a topic was closer to our own lives.

(B) [when considering ‘a language lesson’ as a possible topic]
   S. has just started a course on Persian, it might be fun to choose this as a topic.

(C) [when discussing the merits of ‘analyzing an English poem’]
   We thought that an English poem would appeal to this audience.

(D) [when discussing the merits of ‘musicology’ as a topic]
   An advantage of this topic is that most people will find it interesting.

Groups B and C implicitly refer to the need that lesson topics address ‘common ground’ (Werth 1999; see also ‘common knowledge’, Edwards & Mercer 1987) interests that are shared between participants: ‘we are all language students’ and ‘we are all prospective teachers of English’. They address structural features of the social situation that contextualizes ‘the teach’: both shared cultural and current classroom parameters are oriented to.

The data suggest that different sets of contextual constraints are systematically checked during the planning phase: constraints on topics (feedback conditions; time, place and attributes available); constraints on cultural and classroom roles. Next to practical concerns the ritual demand of asymmetry - the greater expertise of the teacher - appears to be crucial in the decision making process: it often causes suggested topics to be rejected even after prolonged discussion. The topic is given a green light only if all conditions are met. In every phase of the negotiations proposals are mapped on these pre-suppositionally generated, structurally inherited, conditions.

In the end all groups decide on a topic in which one of the group members is an ‘expert’. That also resolves the issue of who will ‘be the teacher’. Each of the group reports includes explicit formulations of ‘floor formats’ that are dispreferred: ‘no monologue’; ‘no mini-lecture’; ‘no fifteen minutes ’teacher talk’; ‘no discussion’. In the end the groups settle on the following topics:

- the writing of letters of application (group A)
- an introduction to the Persian language (group B)
- an analysis of a poem by Ted Hughes (group C)
- the elements of a Requiem or Mass (group D)
5.6 Data set 2. The video data: the mini-lessons

The reports show what underlying assumptions and constraints on what constitutes ‘good’ teaching were mentioned and shared in the preparation phase of the lessons. We will now proceed to what happened during the actual ‘teach’.

5.6.1 Opening sequences

The opening sequences of interactions have traditionally been a focus of interest for conversation analysts: at this point participants have to define their mutual roles and tasks. Labov and Fanshel’s micro-analysis of the first fifteen minutes of a therapy session (1977) is a well-known example of this kind of research. Mazeland’s study of opening sequences of lessons (1983) and van Dam van Isselt’s analysis of two first EFL lessons taught at secondary school (1993) address the same issues. Although the beginning of the micro-teaching lessons is of course ‘artificial’ in that the teacher does not have to negotiate its ‘real’ beginning in a noisy classroom with twenty-odd kids (pressing the record-button of the video camera counts as the official kick-off), it is still worth looking into: the ‘teach’, as an isolated discourse unit that is not part of a ‘real’ curriculum, cannot be presented in a void; it still has to be contextualized somehow.

We will analyse the opening sequences of all four lessons in turn to investigate how lesson topics are introduced and contextualized.

Group A: letters of application

Teacher A all of you no doubt have experience with letters of application – [looks around; no response] I have at any rate – [starts monologue on writing letters of application].

Since this is an isolated lesson the teacher does not have ‘the continuity of common knowledge’ of class and teacher (Edwards and Mercer 1987:82) to draw upon. Pedagogical recommendations for the planning and execution of lessons, however, without exception emphasize that they should be finely-tuned to the students’ information state. The teacher, therefore, takes his refuge to a reference to ‘out-of-school’ experience: all of you no doubt have experience with letters of application. With this remark he seems to comply with the pedagogical demands. In fact, however, he assumes rather than probes the group’s familiarity with the topic on the agenda: he introduces a presupposition without interactionally checking its validity for this group.
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of addressees. The teacher clearly takes his own member's position in the group as point of departure: as peers the others are bound to share his experience with what the utterance itself sets up as default cultural knowledge. Hedges like 'surely' and 'at any rate' introduce a qualification of these global expectations: he may be wrong or partially wrong, the assertion may not be valid for all of the co-present students. Their silence and the absence of conversational backchannel responses (nodding, eye contact, etc.; Goffman 1967) cannot be taken as consent that they all share such experiences: in the enactment of their current student role in a multiparty situation, they are not obliged to react.

Note that the teacher has an interest in not actually checking whether his assumptions are right or not: an enthusiastic 'yes - of course!' would endanger the relevance of the prepared lesson plan that assumes zero knowledge of the subject. Adjusting the lesson plan on the spot is an extremely difficult task for novice teachers, besides breaking his commitment to execute the group plan. Any negotiations would be pseudo-negotiations: 'it' has to be done anyway.

Group B: an introduction to Persian

Teacher B: in the course of your teaching career you will undoubtedly meet students from other countries -- other cultures, other languages -- [looks around] before I begin: does anybody know any Persian?

Class: [shake head; mumble] no -- no

(B): OH that's WONderful [laughs]

Class: [laughter]

Teacher B strategically contextualizes the lesson topic as one that is locally relevant for her students in their identity as prospective teachers. Having framed 'Persian' as one of the unfamiliar languages or cultures that teachers may encounter in their careers, she initiates an explicit 'check for competence' addressed to the class collectively. There is now a real question on the floor that creates an interactional obligation for all co-present addressees: any 'knowing' student has to identify him- or herself. Most of the students simultaneously respond through the verbal and non-verbal channels. Some students mumble 'no'; others shake their heads or do not react at all: it turns out none of them have any knowledge of Persian. The teacher is visibly and audibly relieved, and shares her relief with the class (her peers?) -- an ingroup joke results. They are all aware of her dilemma: a teacher has an interest in having students that are (partially) incompetent in the task domain. There is evidence now that ritual constraints on classroom roles and tasks -- the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge between participants in the social roles of 'teacher' and 'student' -- are met. The students do not know what the teacher intends to teach. The lesson may begin.
Group C: analyzing a poem by Ted Hughes

Teacher C  [hands out copies of the poem] yes-uh – [looks around] there may be people here who already know this poem – they should just keep quiet for the time being [slightly embarrassed laugh]

In the group reports, it was mentioned that peer teaching episodes involve a risk that some students are equally competent as the teacher. In that case ritual classroom parameters are violated (see previous paragraph). The poem group C has selected as a lesson topic, is subjected to in-depth analysis in a literary criticism course that has run for several years in the English Department. Some of the students may have followed this course, without the current teacher being aware of this.

Teacher C goes straight to the heart of the matter. Knowing as much as the teacher is a ritual fault that disqualifies those students as ratified participants of the lesson event. She explicitly reduces them to ‘bystanders’ who should ‘act so as to maximally encourage the fiction that they aren’t present’ (Goffman 1981: 132). The remark implies that they have no access to the classroom floor and that any contributions they venture will be ignored. As in the case of teacher A, teacher C does not do a floor check: it remains strategically ambiguous whether any of the students in fact qualify for this non-participant role.

Group D: Mozart’s Requiem

Teacher D  WELL – actually – we’ve decided to build in an audio-visual dimension – I’m going to write on the blackboard – and while doing so I will ask you to listen – [starts audio-tape with music; starts writing the names of the consecutive parts of a Mass on the blackboard]

Class  [listen to the music]

(D)  [finishes her writing and immediately stops the music] OK – so this was Mozart’s Requiem.

Teacher D is the only one who does not, either explicitly or implicitly, refer to the information state of her students at all. The fact that she writes information on the blackboard may be taken as implying that the subject-matter is supposed to be new for her class. She does not, however, verbally construct relevance for her lesson topic given the current population: the lesson is contextualized only as a group decision about a multimedia approach to be adopted. It is quite feasible that some of the students are familiar with Mozart’s Requiem and recognize the music. The teacher does not mention that possibility either at the beginning or the end of the music. As soon as the music stops she makes a closing move: ‘OK – so this was Mozart's Requiem’, without opening the floor for any spontaneous comments or reactions from the class. Competence on the part of the students must be ignored or remain hidden. The teacher
starts a monologue about the constituent parts of a Mass. The students listen. The ritual ‘lesson event’ is under way.

Discussion

Topicalizing what students already know or do not know serves a double purpose: it constructs conversational coherence and relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986) for the lesson topic on the agenda as well as addressing the pedagogical requirement of linking new knowledge to old knowledge. For learning to take place the lesson should build on what students already know. On the other hand the tasks should not be ‘trivial’ in the sense that they do not update the current information state of the (some? all? of) the students. In that case the lesson turns into a purely ritual event.

Clearly the student teachers are intuitively aware of this condition. All but one of them begin their lessons by speculating on the shared knowledge or common ground experiences that the students possibly or probably have. Instead of interactionally checking the conditions for learning, some of the teachers change the current state of the classroom world so as to match the predefined ritual conditions. The requirements are only mentioned, not implemented (used). This excludes some students from participating.

5.6.2 Classroom and conversational turns

In spite of the emphasis on the importance of interaction in the reports on the lesson planning, there is very little interaction in the lessons taught during ‘the teach’, except in lesson B. Teacher C desperately tries to generate response from the class, but she hardly succeeds: even allocated turns are not taken or remain empty. Lesson D consists entirely of a teacher monologue, without any verbal or non-verbal attempt by the teacher to involve the students: she does not even make eye-contact with the class. Teacher A does not invite verbal student contributions in any way either, but his monologue could be characterized as a performance, a one-man show, which highly entertains the students: he frequently makes joking remarks, to which the class reacts with laughter.
Near the end of lesson A, there is a spontaneous, conversational contribution:

(A) ....that you want to leave because you have an argument with your boss – are having an affair with your secretary – your position becomes impossible –

Class [laughter]

SL would not be very smart to say all that

Class [laughter]

(A) no I don’t think it would be very smart to say all that – would not be very smart to put that in your letter – I could say more about letters of application...

The student’s remark is of the type that story listeners are allowed to fire off. It may be seen as an elaborate back-channel move, which does not claim the floor. The contribution is made in the middle of audience response in the context of laughter. It is not ignored by the teacher, which would have been acceptable since it is not made on the official classroom floor: it is a spontaneous comment. The teacher fits the remark into his monologue and then repeats it with one small adjustment. In the context of a lesson on letters of application ‘something not very smart to say’ becomes ‘something not very smart to write’: the relevance of the remark is constructed on the spot.

After her initial question on students’ prior knowledge on Persian teacher B continues by modelling sounds, words and chunks in Persian that the students ‘repeat after her’. These are elicited in question-answer sequences between the teacher and individual students. Turns are allocated by the teacher to specific students, the unmarked procedure for traditional classrooms (cf. McHoul 1978). If a student cannot produce an answer to the question, another student is called upon. All in all it was a very traditional teacher-fronted episode with a large number of Question-Answer-Evaluation or Initiation-Response-Feedback-type structures (cf. Bellack et al. [1966]1973; Sinclair & Coulthard 1975; Cazden 1988; Van Lier 1988: 149 ff.). At the end of an episode just before the time allotted to the micro-lesson is over, the teacher does a floor-check to see if the other students have understood ‘it’ (lesson targets) as well. Owing to difficulties with transcribing Persian sounds, we render this episode schematically:

(B) [looks around the classroom] are there any questions? – [makes eye-contact with individual students] things you don’t understand? –

S1 [self-selects; asks question]

(B) [makes eye-contact with student 1; answers question] – is that clear? – [looks around the classroom]

S2 [self-selects; asks question]

(B) [makes eye-contact with student 2] [reacts to question] – [looks up] any OTHER questions? – [continues almost immediately]

As we all know teachers’ requests for feedback at the end of lesson episodes often do not elicit the intended reactions: students are often reluctant to confess that they are at a loss in the public domain, because they fear ‘loss of face’ (Brown & Levinson
[1978]1987) if they turn out to be the only one who is ‘not-knowing’. Moreover, teachers’ body language, and the intonation and timing of these kind of floor checks often indicate that in fact the teacher wants to ‘push on’. They thus acquire the status of ‘pre-closers’ (Schegloff & Sacks 1973), which mark the imminent transition to next topic, rather than soliciting further negotiations on the previous one. In this case, however, two students react. This is not a coincidence: the teacher very carefully frames her first two questions as ‘real’ questions by non-verbal and prosodic markers (intonation, gaze, wait time). Her ‘any OTHER questions’ is interactionally marked less carefully – intentionally? - and does not provoke any reactions.

5.6.3 Correction: face dimensions

In lesson B one of the students gives an incorrect answer:

(B) this is a word – who can read what it says? – what can it be? – Mirja?
SM [gives wrong answer]
(B) no, that’s not what it says – it says [gives right answer] - I haven’t explained this correctly

In her response to the student error the teacher makes three consecutive moves: 1) she marks the answer as an error; 2) she other-corrects it; 3) she adds a meta-comment that attributes the occurrence of the error and any blame that might be involved to herself. This is clearly a face-saving or mitigating strategy, entirely in tune with the conventions for the preservation of ‘face’ that Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987) specify. As has been noted elsewhere (Scollon & Wong-Scollon 1995, Van Dam van Isselt, in press) these conventions are inherited in the classroom social domain, in spite of the fact that in the task-domain it is normal for students to make mistakes: ‘the fool’s impunity’ (cf. Kramsch 1993)

As argued before, lessons are speech events with specific rules and constraints, and with asymmetrical role obligations for teacher and students. The students are there exactly because they have to learn, because they ‘do not know’. Loss of face on their part should therefore not be possible. Student teachers, however, are not used to their new role of teacher and often take refuge to the conversational strategies that are so familiar to them. They avoid breaking conversational taboos by using partial or indirectness strategies: they do not say: ‘this is wrong’, but say ‘this is almost right’.

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5.7 Data set 3. The feedback session

5.7.1 First part of class plenary: student and group (self-)evaluations

Immediately after the lessons have been given and taped, they are discussed in the same sub-groups. The discussion focuses on the group’s ‘own’ lesson: what does ‘the teacher’ think about the lesson; which parts of the lesson went well, which parts were less successful; did anything unexpected happen; what would they change if they could give the lesson once more? These questions lead students to a comparison of off-stage planning and on-stage performance, to reflect on discrepancies between the two, and on unanticipated events during the lessons. We will discuss the comments made during the all-class feedback session which followed the discussions in the sub-groups.

In the feedback session all students agreed that lesson A consisted of a brilliant ‘one-man-show’ of the teacher on the subject of letters of application. This analysis was backed up by the applause of the students/audience at the end of the lesson. There was only one student turn; in that sense hardly any interaction between teacher and students took place. During the feedback session ‘the teacher’ remarked: ‘The class did not say a word – I had no idea what they were thinking’. The absence of backchannel noises and signals had made him nervous and had caused him to rattle on. At that moment he had not been able to come up with another strategy to remedy that situation.

Teacher B was really happy with her performance: ‘it all turned out exactly as I thought it would’. The student-pupils were unanimous in their appreciative comments: ‘It was a real lesson!’ and ‘Gee, it seems as if you have been teaching for years’. During the discussion it turned out that this impression was based on the IRF-structure of the interaction in the lesson and the comprehension checks by the teacher after a correct answer had been given. The teacher also indicated that the question at the beginning of the lesson (‘Does anybody know Persian?’) had been a real question: she emphatically wished to find out whether any of her students already knew some Persian: she had anticipated changes in her lesson plan, if this turned out to be the case.

Teacher C complained about the lack of response on the part of her students. The class had hardly answered her questions and the few answers that were given had come mainly from one student. When they planned the lesson, the group had envisaged that after the exemplary discussion of the first stanza by the teacher, the class would be able to handle the second contrasting stanza, almost without the teacher’s help. The teacher felt embarrassed when her students did not react at all during the second part of the lesson. She felt she ‘owned’ the silence (McDermott & Tylbor 1983) and had experienced its cultural stigma (cf. Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985). As a compensatory strategy she had therefore opted for a rapid succession of questions. The class,
however, indicated that they had been willing to answer these questions but unable to do so: the poem was very difficult - even those students who had worked on it before in the English literature class (and who had been explicitly excluded from the ‘lesson’ game) had been given too little time to think about the poem and answer the questions.

Teacher D commented that she had been so wrapped up in writing on the blackboard, putting on the tape and telling her ‘story’, that she had completely forgotten that the students were there: she had not even seen them. Therefore, the lesson turned into one long, uninterrupted monologue. When they planned the lesson, the group had been quite outspoken on the importance of student participation. However, they had not anticipated the need to plan strategies to achieve this objective. The students commented that they had been overwhelmed by all the facts: they had not been able to keep up with the teacher.

All sub-groups agreed that they had concentrated on the content of the lesson in their lesson plans; they simply had not considered the interactional dimensions of the lesson. As a follow-up the sub-groups were therefore asked to reconsider their original plans and think of strategies to incorporate their interactional objectives more explicitly in their lessons, including seating arrangements, body language and other non-verbal dimensions.

5.7.2 Second part of class plenary: reframing ‘faults’ as shared cultural expectations

During the second part of the feedback session we stimulate the students to formulate as explicitly as possible the discrepancies between what they wanted to do and expected to happen and what actually happened in class. They tend to frame the lack of participation on the part of the ‘students’ as a personal ‘fault’. We then raise the question that it is curious that while all groups were unanimous in emphasizing the importance of participation and involvement, they had, for the most part, not anticipated the need to actually design strategies to achieve this. How come they had all expected ‘interaction’ to emerge without any effort on the part of the teacher?

Together we then trace these expectations to their source: their experience with informal, conversational encounters outside school, where questions get answered and utterances responded to on the basis of self-selection. We thus reframe the ‘faults’ they themselves remarked upon as a result of shared cultural expectation: generations of student teachers have been insufficiently aware that the organization of talk differs across situations and settings. In this way a virtual peer domain is created on-line, in which it is normal for everyone who is new to the classroom game to orient to default conversational conventions – therefore loss of face, blame or personal error are not an issue. We invite students to exploit their own members’
knowledge and make it analytically more accessible: in a classroom multi-party situation, a student is not bound by *conversational* obligations, is not the ‘default other’ who is obliged to answer a question, unless called upon. Self-selection is partially overruled: students often do not have spontaneous access to the floor. In institutional multi-party contexts of talk student participation is something to be achieved rather than to be taken for granted. In order to stimulate their systematic thinking about these issues and their consequences for classroom participation, classroom feedback and classroom learning, we ask them to complete a list in which the differences between informal conversational interactions and classroom interaction are spelled out (see appendix).

Very soon after the students have experienced that interaction with a class of x pupils is not something that emerges spontaneously but something that has to be achieved – planned; organized; consciously attended to in lesson plans – the other side of the coin is likely to come up in the discussions. How does one deal with spontaneous student remarks and comments that are experienced as ‘interruptions’ of their carefully crafted lesson plans? They are likely to cause irritation and negative assessment of the interrupting student as ‘difficult’ or ‘uncooperative’. We remind them that this type of behavior is basically the other side of the same coin: students are not necessarily aware all the time of the fact that conversational parameters of the right to speak are partially overruled in classroom institutional settings. They have to be locally reminded of the rules of the classroom multi-party game and what *variety of that game* – ‘participation rights’ – currently obtain: self-selection in group work or in teacher allocated slots; institutional bid-for-the-turn or allocation procedures at other times.

5.8 Recontextualizing micro-teaching: summary and discussion

The micro-teaching trajectory as described above is markedly different from the traditional micro-teaching format in a number of respects: its place in the program; its aims; the way ‘the teach’ is embedded in a number of subsequent activities; the fact that most of the activities are co-authored. The group reports on the planning phase of the lessons show that the lack of restriction on possible lesson topic turns out to be a *resource for reflection*. The ‘teach’ shows that shared cultural assumptions about what makes a good lesson or a good teacher are difficult to implement – and generates a learner-based curriculum.

We unpack the observations made by the students during the micro-teaching assignments as based in sets of interactional constraints that are systematically relevant to learning in institutional settings. They show up in normative expectations the students explicitly or implicitly orient to when preparing their lessons:
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- **conversational norms**: self-selection and backchanneling behavior on the part of listeners is normal ("the interaction in the class will take care of itself"; ‘they did not say anything’);
- **ritual norms**: asymmetrical distribution of knowledge; the teacher should be the expert (‘no discussion’); students who are also experts are not allowed to play the game, are excluded or framed as outsiders;
- **individual norms**: individual experiences are mapped onto the current student population without being checked interactionally; assumptions of ‘common ground’ not verified.

The reports on the preparation of the ‘teach’ yield important input for the teacher education course. Within the framework of a cognitive approach to teacher education, novice teachers are often requested to verbalize their ‘personal models’ or ‘working theories’ of teaching (cf. Van Huizen 2000). What an utterance means, however, varies with the discourse and situational context it is produced in (Polanyi & Schä 1983; Lave & Wenger 1991). Opinions produced as answers to questions in a teacher education assignment are different interactional objects from situated, action-driven concerns expressed in the context of a group discussion about how to make a good job of actually teaching a lesson. The remarks made then were firmly anchored in students’ ideas about practice; the discrepancies that showed up caused an update of those ideas: make them more practice-based and context-sensitive.

One recurrent problem in teacher training is that student teachers are unable to *see* what interactional work goes into the smooth coordination of talk and tasks in various types of classroom multiparty settings. For that reason their ideas about the type of teacher they want to be (cf. ‘conceptual schemata’ or ‘cognitive structures’; McLeod 1987) tend to be rather lofty and vague – and thus difficult to operationalize. We show that discrepancies between what student teachers *think* is ‘good teaching’ and what actually happens when they teach a lesson to their peers, can be exploited to alert them to systematic features of interactional situations in and outside school. Ways of thinking about educational effectiveness or educational innovation should be backed up by fine-grained instruments of reflection that are empirically valid.

We argue that a novice teacher’s model of teaching is *not* only a matter of individual ideas or preferences. A situated interactional rather than psychological focus on classroom behavior creates opportunities for updating and refining students’ ways of thinking about educational encounters and enables them to formulate follow-up trajectories in terms of well-articulated behavioral targets: it allows them to become the researchers of their own classroom.
### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversational Interactions</th>
<th>Classroom interactions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spatial configuration: relative proximity between interactants</td>
<td>Spatial configuration: distance between teacher and learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few constraints on mobility</td>
<td>Limited mobility for learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants have the right to initiate, change or close a topic</td>
<td>Only the teacher has the right to initiate, change or close a topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants determine the length of their own turns at talk</td>
<td>Teacher determines the length of turns at talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-selection, spontaneous turns at talk</td>
<td>No self-selection, allocated turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An interactant is free to choose not to answer a question</td>
<td>Students have to say something when called upon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No ‘display questions’</td>
<td>Extensive use of ‘display questions’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utterance pairs</td>
<td>Utterance triad (IRF structure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interruptions are the norm</td>
<td>Interruptions are not allowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listener backchannel signals are the norm</td>
<td>Listeners give few back-channel signals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turns at talk overlap; short pauses between turns</td>
<td>Hardly any overlap; longer pauses between turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtle coordination of gaze and non-verbal behavior</td>
<td>Non-verbal behavior more explicit and expressive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B. The students receive only the list of features of conversational interactions; they then fill in the right-hand side in groups.