# 9 Talking and teaching: reflective comments on in-classroom activities

**Wes Sharrock and Bob Anderson**

## Introduction and conclusions

One complaint which is often made against sociologists is that they tell you what you already know. There is substance to such a complaint, though it might be a little more precisely worded to indicate that they tell you what they know as though they were telling you something that was news. Telling people things they already know is not always a redundant pursuit, for there are times when it is important (and difficult) to keep attention focused upon the well-known, for that can all too easily be left out of account when abstract or theoretical thinking is being done.

What we have to say here, if there is any truth to it, will be no great news to teachers who will be wholly familiar with the kinds of things we pay attention to, but we will be trying to show the importance of taking note of these things in any proposed sociological rendition of life-in-the-classroom. Though what we have to say is said in response to and in continuance of the internecine disputes over the nature of sociology itself, we will contrive to suppress or simplify technical sociological issues and will make the argument as accessible as we can to the working teacher.

The aim of this book is to give the teacher sociological resources for independent thinking about the organization of activities in the classroom which, in the typical case, is the environment of the working day. We will not attempt to contribute to it by providing another exercise in the close examination of detailed organization of some activities, but rather by trying to place such detailed investigations within a larger picture, within the context of the basic effort to understand the organization of activities and the order of social settings.

Whilst the introduction of the audio and video recorder has proven a significant step forward in social research, we should not confuse ends and means; we should bear in mind that whilst the question of what we are to look at is by no means a trivial one, it is a little less important than the question of how we are to look at whatever we do look at. Indeed, there are critical ways in which the decision as to how we are to look at things determines what we shall be seeing when we look.





It is perhaps an unusually early moment at which to give our conclusions, but we will nonetheless offer them now, using the remainder of the chapter to get back to them.

We will endorse the view that what goes on in classrooms is (often, in large part) talking and that, therefore, to understand teaching we must look at talking. There are senses in which an understanding of teaching would be entirely coincident with an understanding of the organization of talking, but to see how teaching and talking do relate, it is always important to be clear about what is understood to be 'the organization of talking'. There are ways of representing the organization of talking which will represent the things that go on in classrooms well enough, but which will in other respects comprehensively miss the point of the activities so represented.

## Sources of trouble, sources of order

There are tendencies inherent in (at least certain modes of) sociological reasoning which lead researchers to pay attention to almost everything that goes on in a social setting except the relevant business of the setting. Though there is a wide variety of sociological specialisms, including the 'sociology of education' along with 'the sociology of science', 'the sociology of work', 'the sociology of medicine' and so on, it might be more accurate if they were to be renamed to characterize more faithfully their actual content. Hence, the sociology of medicine could more accurately be called 'the sociology of almost everything about health provision excluding the nature of medical "treatment" ' and, in a matching fashion, the 'sociology of science' could be called 'the sociology of almost everything about science, except the work of making scientific investigations and discoveries'.

This point is no longer quite so true as it was a very few years ago, for some people, under the pressure of views like our own and from other considerations, are recognizing the importance of taking serious and central note of the need to look at the actual business in which the parties to the setting are actively engaged.

Acknowledging such a need and fulfilling it are alas, two quite different things and it is easy enough to slip over into doing something very different even when we set out to fulfil it. To fulfil it here, we shall be doing no more than recommending that attention be paid to in-classroom talk as involving the oral exposition and inculcation of a subject. In plainer words, regard classroom talk as a matter of talking through a subject in such a way that it can be learned.

As we have pointed out, to say that teaching involves talking will be no news to teachers, but as we also remarked, in thinking theoretically about a

familiar activity it is only too possible to exclude obvious and vitally relevant matters from consideration.

We do not, then, say that teachers are unaware of the oral nature of much of their practice, but we do advise them that they will not find it easy to take account of it in applying sociology to their own classrooms and they will not find many (if any) resources in sociology for enabling them to do so. In talking of the need to develop ways of seeing what goes on in classrooms, for example, talking history, talking sociology, talking biology, then we are talking about the need to do something which will have to be undertaken almost from scratch.

There are, we said, inherent tendencies in sociology which militate against the treatment of the 'substance' or 'business' of social activities. Some sociologists will even differentiate explicitly between 'form' and 'content' and elect to attend to form rather than content! Of these inherent tendencies, we think there are two main and related ones, namely generality and abstraction.

Here we touch upon what are, within sociology, very deep issues indeed. It is simply taken for granted that sociology is or is to become a generalizing discipline. Though there is much discussion as to what that means and amounts to, in practice its current implication is for people to tend to case their descriptions in very generalized terms. Having studied a classroom, a few classrooms, even a substantial number of classrooms, the researcher feels required to cast his report in terms of comments about '*the* language of teaching' (Edwards and Furlong, 1975), or '*the* work context of teaching' (Denscombe, 1980), or '*the* organization of pupil participation' (Hammersley, 1974). Thus the operative aim of much research is to see instances of the activity under scrutiny as being typical or representative of the whole category that they instance. Consequently, *a* classroom comes to stand in for *the* classroom.

Our objection to this approach is not at all the usual one, namely, that a few instances studied in some detail are not a sufficient basis for generalization to the type or category. No – because this usual and standard criticism requires the assumption that the aim of generalizing is the right one and that the issue for discussion concerns means of obtaining it. For us, ends come into question. For the presumption of the need for generalizing involves the desire to talk about classrooms-in-general before we can seriously claim to have understood what goes on in any one of them.

We do not accept the stock reply that to understand a classroom *is* to understand it in general terms, i.e. to see it as the product of the same factors or forces which produce order and organization not in one, but in the generality of classrooms. We do not think that this is the right way at all and would say that generalization is a matter of understanding the relationship between instances, and to do so requires an understanding of the instances





themselves. We need do no more to counter the stock reply than resort simply to pointing to the consequences of a premature wish for generality. The desire to generalize has the inevitable consequence of directing the attention of researchers to the organization of classrooms only insofar as they resemble one other. It creates an interest in those elements of classroom organization that are the same from classroom to classroom, regardless of the diversity of things that might otherwise be seen to be going on in them.

The employment of abstraction is the problematic accompaniment of the urge to generalize. The argument goes that science must abstract, that we all do abstract and that we cannot avoid doing so. Accordingly, to understand the organization of classrooms we must abstract, we must leave out of account what is being taught. Whether the pupils are being taught music or chemistry or English or history, we must look at the general dynamics of the organization of classrooms as collective and co-ordinated occasions; or at the formal properties of teacher-pupil relations and the power asymmetries that obtain; or at the sequencing of question-answer alternations in talk.

We suggest, however, that whilst abstraction may be an inevitable feature of scientific work, it is a strategic one, whereas the question of what we can leave out is pivotal. And what we can leave out depends upon what we are trying to do. We think that we are looking for something rather different from those sociologists who may seem in many respects to occupy something like the same position as us. We are interested in the question of how actions are done, how activities are organized or, more accurately, how they organize themselves. We are not interested in seeing what standard of typical patterns the same sorts of activities 'fall into', but on the contrary want to see how activities are accomplished without caring whether they do or do not show the same forms of arrangement as other activities.

Consequently, we are not looking for those sorts of patterns which become visible only through comparing many different occasions or undergoing a sophisticated sociological training. We want to attend to those matters which are visible in the midst of the activity which manifests them. We attend to such matters because we want to emphasize those things which are practically indispensible to the staging of an occasion as that occasion.

Thus our emphasis shifts away from questions about the way one occasion resembles others of the same sort in favour of questions which ask about the way a specific occasion is put together. In short, we move to questions about the occasion's specificity, about the way 'this one' is put together. We recognize that such a characterization of our approach seems repetitive and could be thoroughly opaque so we will shortly attempt a more lucid formulation of these contentions by providing illustrations for them.

From this point of view, the 'business' of occasions is not something which can be abstracted out. On the contrary, its treatment becomes something which is analytically inescapable. From our point of view, the practical

organization of the classroom is inextricable from its 'subject matter'.

For some sociological analysts, it is wholly legitimate to disregard the question of how teachers and pupils talk history or biology or whatever. If their interest is in questions like the share-out of talk in the classroom between teacher and pupils, or the sorts of distribution of types of utterances (interrogative, imperative, etc.) amongst different types of parties to a classroom, then it does not really matter about the content of the talk. If, however, such investigations are intended to contribute to understanding the operation of social life and settings, then the selection of such topics leaves quite unclarified the nature of the relationship between the patterns of distribution which they reveal and the workaday business of taking 4x through the administrative reforms of King John in period 3 on Tuesday.

From our standpoint, we cannot afford to abstract out such matters for it is precisely the issue of what is to be said/talked about which is the issue for practical organization.

For those who must conduct classes, the question of what is to be talked about and how, word by word, it is to be talked about is the very stuff of the work. The working teacher cannot dispense with the content of the talk and utter a sequence of interrogatives and imperatives. To continue with the example from history, he must ask for the names of kings, the dates of battles, the summary content of court rolls, the enumerated content of legislation and so forth. What can be mere detail for the sociologist interested in distributional aspects of talk cannot be so treated by the speakers and hearers in the setting, for they must 'enact' that 'mere detail', they must produce it in and as the business that they do.

A cautionary point – we are not saying that the parties to classroom activity cannot dismiss things as mere detail, for assuredly they can and do. If they do so, however, then it is incumbent upon us not to take this dismissal as a standard of our own judgement of what does and does not deserve attention. Instead, we must treat it as the occasion for considering, for example, the way in which exposition of a subject can involve dispensing with details on that occasion.

**Contrastive orientations to phasing**

Let us try to clarify the character of our argument by exemplifying the contrast we are trying to make through the consideration of how 'phasing' in a lesson, seminar, or lecture might be treated. Though the points we are making can be applied equally to the organization of the lesson, seminar, or lecture, the problems and practices we shall choose to illustrate our comments will tend to relate most specifically to the environment which is most familiar to us, that of higher education.

We must take our argument most carefully at this point because we can seem to be producing a glowing contradiction, i.e., criticizing generalized





accounts of teaching on the one hand, but providing an equally generalized, even over-generalized, version on the other. Let us make it quite clear, then, that the following remarks make no kind of pretensions to being, or even preparing to be, some generalized, systematic account of how teaching is organized. They are addressed to some issues of principle which bear upon research methodology and they are generalized remarks only in this sense. At no point is any mention of 'teaching' to be taken to imply that the kind of practice we are talking about is a standard or widespread one. We are talking purely of some things than can and do happen in the world of teaching, things that must be allowed for in any putatively general account of that activity. Thus, comments on 'teaching' are not presented as the products of careful study of instances of that phenomenon but as suggestions as to how we might begin the inspection of such instances.

We are taking it that the elemental problem is to understand not what patterns activities fall into, but how they are 'put together' into whatever patterns they might make: it is the assembling, not the final shape of the assembly, that is of interest. This contrast applies to the treatment of phasing.

It is clear enough that activities in classrooms often have an episodic character, that the kinds of activities being engaged in over time differ quite considerably and that progress through them is made by 'finishing' with one kind and 'initiating' another. Thus, we can see that the typical class moves from arriving-and-settling-in at the beginning through to clearing-up-and-preparing-to-leave at the end.

What are we to make of this episodic character to events? One thing that can be and has been (Hargreaves et al., 1975) made of it is an effort to identify a standard and ordered sequence of phases for the typical classroom and an associated set of procedures for moving from one stage to the next. Of course, we know only too well that in actual classrooms the episodic arrangements are endlessly voiced, that the duration, constituent activities, character and interrelationship of discernible episodes are all greatly diversified. If we wish to achieve an identification of generally followed phases without necessitating an inordinate amount of detailed study of an enormous range of classroom activities, then the way to do so is to make the stages simple and very abstract, to characterise them in such general terms that they will readily be applicable to any classroom. For example, we can readily identify broad stages like 'entry', 'settling in' 'down to business', 'finishing up', 'leaving'. In the same way, we can identify practices for moving from one phase to the next. These practices too can be done, for example, abstractly and generally, e.g. by using 'changing place and position' and 'making announcements of phase transition'. Such broad categories would encompass the multitudinous range of doings from 'sit down' through 'I want all of you to come over here' and 'get your books out'

to 'now its story time' or 'you can go now'.

It is not *too* difficult, then, in a rough way to contrive an order of phases to a lesson, but how does it contribute to our understanding of the way activities are organized, or done? By studying diverse classroom activities, we can contrive categorizations which are sufficiently abstract to classify the activities in them all. By comparing and contrasting aspects of these different locations one with another, we can build up a composite picture of them all, but by doing so we beg the question, of how they achieve the order that we find them to have. How came this order-of-phases? Is it the product of some 'logic of social interaction' or what? How do the phases we as sociological analysts identify relate to those that the participants can discriminate? How do they 'follow through' this order-of-phases? Do they (somehow) simply fall into it or fall in with it, or do they aim to produce it? And if they aim to produce it, how do they ensure its accomplishment? These questions are surely compellingly relevant to any claim to understand how ordinary in-classroom activities work. Indeed, before setting out to identify general properties of classroom activity, we need to have given a lot of thought to what we are doing it for.

In the analytical mentality of the researcher, one of the things that an effort to discriminate phases and episodes requires is their precise definition, the identification of exact points of transition. The approach requires an orientation to activities in a way designed to pick out and bound as sharply as possible the discriminable episodes. Yet, we note that one thing which is widely noticeable about classroom activity is that the parties to it are engaged not in discriminating episodes (as a cognitive or perceptual matter), but in segregating them (as an organizational or managerial matter). Therefore, the extent to which the researcher can identify distinct phases will depend upon the extent to which the parties have kept them separate. It is easy to talk about the ordered phases of 'settling in' and 'getting down to business', but casual observation shows that the extent to which 'settling in' takes place before 'getting down to business' depends on the extent to which people insist on getting settled in first. Thus, a start can be deferred whilst waiting for all parties to arrive and until everyone present has subsided into silence. Equally well, a start can be made even as people are arriving and settling in or starts and restarts can be made in response to the appearance of late arrivals. Sometimes, indeed, a start can be made and then abandoned in favour of some other item of business. The extent to which episodes are ordered, and segregated, then, can depend upon the extent to which someone insists that they be so shaped. Thus the teacher can insist, 'no start until you are all ready'.

Similarly, it is possible for parties to orient to and achieve imperceptible transitions between episodes, to move things from one phase to another in such a way that the realization that a transition has been made will occur





only retrospectively, being noticed only when in the midst of the new phase. The visibility of the organization of in-classroom activity in its course is something that is deeply implicated with their organization. It is a practically relevant matter for teaching and lecturing whether people should be clearly aware that they are stopping doing one thing and starting to do another, different one, or whether they should be started off doing one thing and led into doing something quite different without being aware what is happening to them.

We are not, however, suggesting that phases 'just happen', that classroom activities 'turn out' to have an episodic structure. On the contrary, they turn out to have such a structure because it has been projected from the outset.

Although what goes on in the classroom does have a moment-to-moment organization, it is not organized on that basis alone, for the moment-to-moment organization represents (can represent) the realization of a prior design, the fulfilment of an intended succession of phases. For some parties to the occasion, then, the future development of the occasion will have been anticipated. It will not, however, have been idly anticipated in the sense that it was expected and it did happen. Rather, it will have been actively anticipated in the sense that it will have been projected and action taken to bring it about as projected.

The projection of an anticipated course of development implies, for understanding what is going on at any point in time, attention being paid to the way in which present activities possess the potential for future development. We have to attend to the way in which the arrangement of matters now is being undertaken in order to provide for the possibility that later (in fifteen minutes, say, or 'after we have finished what we are doing now') the parties will be 'in position' to make the projected transition from this episode to that. Thus, present activities can be examined as 'preparation' or 'groundwork' for the achievement of a required transition: just what do we have to do now to ensure, for example, that there will be time to clear away before the bell goes and the next class comes in? Just how do we make a start so that we not only visibly 'get down to business' in such a way that first remarks will identify the topic being initiated, but also ensure that the mode of address to this topic will produce coherent subsequent talk that will lead into the next topic as its natural successor? For example, it is possible that as a lecture begins, and specific remarks are made, the lecturer has no idea how specifically the transitions will be made. Instead the talk is genuinely improvized, and, having begun, ways will be found to bring about the promised organization. Indeed, laying things out at the beginning, by giving a promised arrangement, is a way of keeping the business to an anticipated course. To write things up on the board in anticipation of doing them is a way of ensuring that they will get done. To list things to be talked of is a way of reminding ourselves later, when we have talked on some of them, which

other intended objects of discussion we have promised. In fact, promising is a way of construing future possibilities of development by setting up commitments to do the promised activity.

An important aspect of phasing is pacing. We would certainly not want to be taken as arguing that those who project a course of development for a class have a definite and precisely timed preconception of the course to be taken. Matters can be more or less definitely anticipated and subsequent development can be tied more or less firmly to a strict scheduling. The pacing of phasing may follow a strict schedule so that the approach of the scheduled termination of a phase may also terminate that activity without regard for its stage of completion. Alternatively, an activity may be brought to a 'natural' closure by means of the expeditious and truncated treatment of matters outstanding. Adherence to the schedule can be given priority, but need not be. Nor need any strict scheduling be attached to a projected arrangement in the first place. We can pace ourselves so that matters will be treated, however long that proves to take. Therefore, the completion of a task in hand will be guaranteed, though all will have to wait to see how long that will take, to see what will have to be said to comprise exhaustive talk adequate-for-our-purposes to some topic. Thus, announcements of projected phasings can take the form of contingency plans of the sort, 'I'll try to finish talking about that this week but if not I'll carry over into the next class. On the other hand, if I do get to the end then I'll start on...'.

**Providing the organization**

In the previous section, we have been trying in part to make a contract between (1) the idea that it is the researcher's job to find an organization in activities which is standard and related to the requirements of sociological theory, and (2) the idea that we might look to find the organization that is, so to speak, put there to be found.

The organization in (2) is not put there to be found by sociologists; it is the organization that is put there to be found by participants in the activity being organized. It is the organization that is put there to be found by the students, colleagues, administrators and all those who have legitimate interests in and rights to know 'what goes on in classrooms'. In fact, so far we have been taking it for granted that talk in classrooms can be seen as carrying out the tasks of teachers and students or pupils and we have been leading up to the point that it is someone's task to give the occasion organization.

Returning to the main theme, then, we can say that the task of giving an organization to events in a classroom often falls to the teacher though it need not necessarily do so. How the class is to be run, what it is to do, who is to do what – these are matters which can be collectively decided, and negotiating a division of labour in organizing the occasion (or the course) can be one feature of the occasion (or course) itself. Further, the word 'negotiate' has been





somewhat abused in recent years in sociology in the form of a generalized conception of social order as negotiation, but in the arrangement of some classes it can and does find quite liberal application. For the arrangements of a class can be made in the form of a deal of the sort, 'if you'll do this, then I'll do that', and 'if you'll do this I won't do what I could, i.e. if you'll talk up I won't set assignments for you to do'.

Of course, the task of giving the occasion organization does usually fall to the teacher and the work involved is not achieved simply through the making of talk in the classroom alone, but through the production of artefacts such as the provision of course outlines, organized reading lists, essay lists and the adoption of a textbook's organization as the model for the course to follow. In these ways, parties to the classroom activities can be informed about the purpose and content of the course, the topics to be treated and their sequential or phased order of treatment.

Again, we do not want to be understood to be proposing that it is invariably the case that the teacher decides these matters. We are well aware that the negotiation of a division of labour for a course can involve such matters as electing a theme and deciding an order of topics. Even where teachers retain control of the course organization, they can attempt to 'farm out' the work of discovering thematic unity, developing arguments or cumulating information in course activity. For example, the provision of required readings as a basis for the organization of classes can give students the task of making out the connections between texts and between topics. Tussles can and do take place over the discoverability of projected course contents, with students complaining that they cannot see the plan, direction, unity, development or payoff in the things they are presently doing. Thus teachers often have 'time out' from projected organizational arrangements in order to review and debate these very arrangements with a view to proposing and accomplishing some reconstruction of them.

Such observations of classroom organization are sometimes criticized on the grounds that we cannot understand what goes on in a classroom without reference to the 'context' within which activities are set. Often, this argument is about whether we need to 'relate' what goes on in the classroom to the organization of the school as an organization, or to the organization of the society as a whole, especially its history and class structure.

It is all too easy to exchange views about the importance of 'context' without ever achieving any sort of clarity as to what is to be counted as relevant for inclusion in 'context'. Here, we cannot pursue the very complicated question of the role of 'context' very far save in one of its most cogent aspects, namely, the question of whether in understanding in-classroom activities we can do so without reference to 'a wider social setting'. One argument about the importance of 'context' supposes that there is a determinate, all-inclusive context, that of the society as a whole, and that no action or

activity can be understood unless it is set against this 'context'.

In sociology, there is much controversy about this. One issue, which many people think is the most important, concerns scale. Roughly, sociologists are divided between those who look at societies as a whole and those who look at face-to-face transactions. Still others seek a compromise and try to show that the way to resolve controversy (if it can be resolved) is to treat both approaches as complementary. Without denying the legitimacy of looking at life in the classroom with all the accompanying fine details of conduct, these conciliators suggest that we need to understand how the classroom 'fits into' the society as a whole.

We have already suggested that the key methodological question is never only 'what do we look at?', but always and importantly is also 'how are we to look?'. Clearly, then, in our view, scale cannot be the significant question. Here we disagree with most students of in-classroom activities who are likely to share the assumption that the consideration of scale is crucial. In their view, such a consideration does reflect a real difference in what is done, because they tend to see their contribution to the sociology of education as that of turning attention away from the study of 'the education system as a whole' and towards the examination of 'what really goes on in classrooms'.

We do not see any point in taking militant positions *vis-à-vis* the issue of whether we should or should not confine our attention to what goes on in the classroom, especially since we are trying to raise questions as to what (from a sociological point of view) does 'go on' in classrooms. Further, we do not see all answers as cumulative and interconnected and the question as to whether we can or cannot understand what goes on in the classroom without reference to the 'wider social context' seems only to raise other questions: what aspects of life in the classroom do we seek to understand? Do we require reference to 'external' considerations to understand them?

As we have already noted, questions about the organization of actions are often begged and never more evidently so than in sociologists' discussions about the relationship between in-classroom activities and the 'wider environment'. For their arguments presuppose that they have a clear understanding of how activities actually do relate together and that they do understand the way in which local events such as classroom activities build up into that most complex system of activity, the society as a whole. We do not simply doubt, but go so far as to deny, that such an understanding has been attained. The argument is that our task is precisely that of understanding how one action relates to another, how one activity relates to another.

In the first instance, this task does not query the relationship between two specific actions, A and B, but raises the question of the kinds of relationships that are to be looked for. Thus, many think of the kind of relationship between activities to be looked at in causal terms, i.e. does one action bring about another? Others like the idea that actions can be looked at as part of a





strategy to see what kind of calculated connection action A may have to B as a way of achieving a goal. On our part, we are trying to suggest yet another way of looking for connections, namely that actions are to be looked at as constituents of courses of action, to see how they relate to each other in carrying out the courses of action they make up. This way of making our point may be too abstract and some exemplification will be useful.

In a classroom it may be that there is something which can be pointed to as 'the business' of that class, i.e. what it has been organized to do. For example, in a lecture it is the case that, sometimes, the lecture 'makes one point' and that what the lecture has to say is said briefly, in so many words, at a late point in the lecture's course. Nonetheless, a great deal of talking may be done in that lecture prior to the making of that point. How does that talking relate to the making of the lecturer's point? It can, of course, relate in a great many ways, but it could be, for example, that the previous talk provides 'scene setting' for the making of that point, laying the groundwork for the business of that class by giving the students background to the point to be made, by giving them technical information to let them understand the point when it is made, by providing context for the point to be made so that its significance will be seen when it is made, by 'setting up' the argument so that the point will come as a surprising conclusion and so forth. The work of the lecture may, then, be preparatory to, elucidatory of, facilitating progress toward and explicating the sense and significance of its own conclusion. We are suggesting, then, that it is in terms of their 'organizational contribution' that we can look at the diverse activities in the classroom, to see – as we illustrate with the example of the lecture – what role they play in getting the work of the classroom done.

Understood in such terms, what is 'going on' in the classroom consists in its business-like organization and a bare transcription of the talk, however faithfully it might depict every sound made in the classroom, would not, for those involved in the classroom, count as an adequate record of what was said and done. A page of student notes, however sparse, listing 'main points made' might be, for them, a better, more relevant, more useful record, identifying not 'what was said' but, instead, 'what the lecturer was getting at with what was said...'.

For students to show that they understand what took place it would not do for them to produce a good record of the talk in a lecture for they are required to attend to that talk not as specific utterances but as the presentation of a subject matter. Consequently, they are required to see what is said as, for example, exhibiting a subject's principles, steps in a developing argument. They are required to see in the talk things that will never be explicitly said, to identify hints, allusions and elliptical references, to see the connection between what is said here and now and what has been said in previous meetings of the same course or in different courses than this. That they under-

stand what was said is not shown by reciting the words that were used; they show they follow the sense and course of remarks by reformulating them, by saying things in their own words, by seeing what is said as something that can equivalently be said in quite other words. For teachers, reading student assignments and examinations is a way of finding out what has been 'going on' in the classroom, how the things that were being said were being understood, what arguments, themes, conclusions, etc. were being extracted from the talk, etc. It is not usual for such readings to yield surprises.

**The oral exposition of a subject**

Throughout, we have been trying to return attention to the 'official business' of the classroom, to play up the extent to which talk of and thought about events in the classroom are inextricably involved with what ought to be going on in classrooms.

It has often come to be conceived as a mark of sociological artfulness to show that what goes on in any social setting is almost anything except its official business. Just as in courtrooms the waiting, rather than the trial, can be seen to take up the time and effort, so in classrooms the struggle-for-control rather than the teaching can be seen to be what is important. We do not wish to deny this importance. After all, it is a matter which will be the material for common room/staff room gossip and speculation for any teaching organization. At the same time, however, we would wish to give recognition to the fact that the struggle-for-control is usually undertaken in the service of getting some teaching done and that keeping control and getting through the requisite subject matter are tasks which can be done concurrently.

We are suggesting that there is no need to suppose, because teaching is sometimes a struggle-for-control, that it is generally so. Therefore, we need not see all that goes on in any classroom as instrumental in maintaining control and need not think of all occasions where someone is not overtly maintaining control as being ones in which they must, therefore, covertly be doing so. Rather, we should ask: when does control arise as a problem for teachers? And when it does, how then is it resolved?

We would rather see this question asked because it does not then tempt us to exercise ingenuity in contriving ways of seeing how talk about the imagery in *Othello* is 'really' an exercise in social control. We want to propose that it be seen instead as talk which is really an exercise in identifying the imagery in *Othello*. Of course, we know that the 'official business' of the classroom does not occupy all the time, and does not always take place, in class. Knowing these things does not mean, however, that the analysis of that 'official business' when it is done should be slighted.

Although, a lot of the time, the talk in the economics class is not of marginal utility or other recognizably relevant matters, a lot of the time it *is*





about such matters. As a discipline, we sociologists are a long way from understanding how lists, anecdotes, diagrams, sketches, equations, assertions, interrogations, allusions to writings, monologues, demonstrations, picture shows with commentaries, discussion of handouts, walking the streets and talking about what is seen – how these comprise 'teaching sociology' or 'chemistry' or 'economics' or whatever. Drawing pictures, making lists, reading out quotations, putting things in numerical form, summarizing arguments, these sorts of things are the practices of our society and we do not think that anyone can yet claim to understand how such practices work (other than in a practical sense). Nor does anyone know how, heterogeneously combined, they can serve to comprise 'a basic course in statistics', 'advanced chromodynamics' or 'an introduction to physics for those without maths' and in the course provide, for example, a 'rigorous and systematic exposition of principles', 'a guide for beginners' or 'a basis for independent practice'.

**Some more conclusions**

We always find it cheering to end with the recognition that as yet we, as *analysts*, understand very little about the things we study. After all, this recognition means that more or less everything remains to be done. At the same time, we stress that *members* routinely accomplish their everyday business without undue problems. We hope that we have fulfilled our promise of making some inroads into the study of this taken-for-granted accomplishment in classrooms. That is to say, into the practical management of 'doing teaching'.

# Doing Teaching

## The Practical Management of Classrooms

Edited by
G.C.F. Payne and E.C. Cuff

BATSFORD ACADEMIC AND EDUCATIONAL LTD
LONDON