

Going general as a resource for doing advising in post-observation conferences in teacher training

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Abstract

In mentor–teacher conversations, mentors routinely engage in the work of advising that entails pointing out problems and proposing solutions, both of which can suggest negative attributions to the teacher's competence, and by extension, encounter various forms of less-than-aligning responses. Based on 50 video-recorded post-observation meetings, this conversation analytic study details one specific resource—*going general*—mobilized by the mentors to handle the delicate work of critiques and suggestions without compromising the task of mentoring. As will be shown, *going general* entails depersonalizing the advice and invoking larger disciplinary or pedagogical principles. While depersonalization removes the relevance of any defensive next act and opens up a space for the possibility of achieving a collaborative understanding of a problem or solution, invoking a larger principle cements that understanding with its apparent irrefutability. Through such depersonalization and principle invocation, *going general* can effectively promote teacher alignment, and as such, facilitate professional socialization. Findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on advising and that on mentor–teacher conversations.

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1. Introduction

As an integral component of language teacher education in the United States at least, mentors typically observe teacher candidates' classes and discuss their observations thereafter. Mentor–teacher conversations during these post-observation conferences constitute a strategic site where teacher learning is accomplished. As such, understanding the dynamics of these conversations would give us the unique access to how teachers' professional competence is built, negotiated, and reproduced (Sweeney, 1983; Wang et al., 2004). A key difficulty faced by mentors in these conversations is the tension between assessment and development (Copland et al., 2009; Copland, 2010). To wit, the task of evaluating the teacher's performance and that of helping the latter grow as a professional are not always compatible since evaluation can sometimes hamper rather than support growth (Waring, 2014). To some extent, this tension is manifested in the activity of advising—an activity that involves identifying problems (e.g., launching critiques) and proposing solutions (e.g., making suggestions) (Waring, 2012). In this paper, I describe a specific practice—*going general*—deployed by the mentors as a resource for managing the delicate advising tasks of launching critiques and doing suggestions in post-observation conferences. While the specifics of the practice will emerge as a result of the detailed analysis to be presented later on in this paper, for the moment, I would invite the reader to think of *going general* roughly as the conduct of

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transcending the specifics of particular problems or solutions to frame any such problems or solutions in terms of generality. For example, instead of saying “Your direction giving lacks specificity,” one might frame the problem in general terms such as “We (as teachers) tend to gloss over the specifics when it comes to direction giving.” The similarity of this practice to others in the literature will be addressed in Discussion and Conclusion.

2. Background

2.1. Advice giving

As an activity that involves one party conveying to another what the former believes to be beneficial to the latter regarding some performance or behavior (Searle, 1969; Waring, 2007a), advising is characterized by its inherent asymmetries (Hutchby, 1995) that presupposes knowledge and expertise of the advice giver (DeCapua and Dunham, 1993; Park, 2012). Such knowledge and expertise may vary from one professional (or everyday) context to the next—with different rights, roles, and constraints at play. As such, there might be a greater or lesser need for minimizing the asymmetries. In a case study of office hours in one German university, for example, advice is generally communicated in an explicit fashion (Limberg, 2010). Similarly, advice to socialize migrants into the New Zealand workplace is delivered in a direct and explicit manner, and such delivery is received favorably (Vine et al., 2012).

In most other contexts, a persistent challenge facing the advice givers is to deliver the advice in ways that neutralize the inherent asymmetries and thereby minimize resistance because “at stake is the advice recipient's identity claim as an engaged, discerning, independent, and competent participant” (Waring, 2007b, p. 110). This means advice can come in many shapes and forms—as information, assessments, interrogatives, and the like (Butler et al., 2010; Kinnell and Maynard, 1996; Limberg and Locher, 2012; Perakyla and Silverman, 1991; Shaw et al., 2015; Silverman, 1997; Vehviläinen, 2012). These diverse formats of advising share the commonality of being less direct or assuming less entitlement and thereby greater symmetry in the matter of advising. In other words, although the advising encounter features the inherent asymmetry between the advice giver and the advice recipient, advice givers typically strive to minimize such asymmetry in a variety of ways. Informing someone of a course of action can be an indirect way of suggesting that course of action; a negative assessment of a particular behavior can be an indirect way of proposing that the behavior needs to be changed; asking *Have you done X?* can be an indirect way of saying X should be done. Advice can also be delivered with “pragmatic ambivalence (Wajnryb, 1998) as “oblique proposals” (Peyrot, 1987) or “hypothetical case formulation” (Linell et al., 2002). It can involve extensive relational work such as hedging, empathizing, and bonding (Locher, 2006). In addition, greater inclusion of the advice recipient in the advising process can also minimize asymmetries and resistance. Advice givers have been shown to approach advising in a stepwise fashion instead of delivering a general piece of advice to an unprepared recipient so that the actual advice is better tailored to the recipient's needs (e.g., Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Locher, 2006; Park, 2014).

Much of this delicate work associated with the delivery of advice may be attributed to its nature as a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown and Levinson, 1987): advice threatens the recipient's negative face (i.e., want to be left alone) as it predicates some future act of the latter; it also threatens the recipient's positive face (i.e., want to be liked) given the criticism often implied in the advice (p. 66). Among the many “mitigating or face-redressive features” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 27) are: using-in-group identity markers, giving reasons, hedging, indicating reluctance, giving hints, and the like, and most pertinent to the current study are such strategies as overgeneralizing (e.g., stating FTA as a general rule) (p. 226) and impersonalizing (e.g., avoiding pronouns “I” and “you”) (pp. 190–205). Indeed, in the advising literature, mitigation (e.g., *It might be good to. . .*) has gained wide recognition as a familiar strategy to attenuate the face-threatening nature of the advising act (e.g., DeCapua and Dunham, 2012; Hyland and Hyland, 2012; see Waring and Song, forthcoming and Locher and Limberg, 2012 for useful overviews). As noted earlier, the face-threatening nature of advice giving is in part etched in the criticism it often implicates, which rarely constitutes the focus in and of itself in discourse analytic studies (see Tracy et al., 1987 and Tracy and Eisenberg, 1990 for exceptions). In Tracy et al.'s (1987) study of what constitutes “good” vs. “bad” criticism, “good” criticism is found to involve positive framing of the negative criticism, reasons for making the change, and more specificity in, and assistance to make, the change suggested. In a way, all these features of “good” criticism may be considered mitigation strategies for redressing the FTA of criticism.

Managing asymmetries and resistance goes beyond initial advice delivery as well. Advice givers engage in a range of interactional work to manage resisted or rejected advice. Hepburn and Potter (2011) document how call takers of a UK child protection helpline repackage resisted advice in a more idiomatic form along with a tag question to treat the client as capable of confirming the reformulated version despite their prior resistance to it. Pudlinski (2012) shows how on US peer telephone helplines advice may be pursued after its initial rejection through interrogating, supporting the advice with additional accounts, and supporting the advice with additional accounts and expressions of concern or worry. The current

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