Language in the Workplace: Towards a Model for Evaluation and Development

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How can the Victoria University Language in the Workplace (LWP) project material be re-presented in a way that is directly useful to 'users' — workplace practitioners? One of the responses that has emerged within the LWP project is to produce a model for evaluating and developing communication processes. Our intention was that such a model could be used by practitioners themselves in their workplaces. In this paper I will very briefly survey four key aspects of a theoretical framework that we have been working with to provide the basis for such a model. The framework is also intended to provide an interface between practitioners and researchers within the LWP project, as well as between the researchers. In this outline, I will assume that readers have greater knowledge of the sociolinguistic literature, and so I will allocate more space to introducing the non-linguistic perspectives.

1. 'Language in the workplace' and 'organisational communication'

There has been little interchange between two fields which are both concerned with workplace communication: the 'workplace discourse' studies based in sociolinguistics (Holmes, 1997) and the 'organisational communication' literature with disciplinary roots in 'communication studies' (Littlejohn, 1996). Part of the value of the organisational communication literature lies in its convergences with the more general literature of organisational studies, opening up the possibilities of looking at organisational issues in communication terms, not just at communication 'in' workplaces. This perspective can make 'communication' central to workplace practitioners — more than just a set of personal skills, no matter how useful.

2. Social constructionism

Social constructionist' approaches can also make communication central to workplaces by framing communication as the creation of our social worlds, rather than as an activity that we do within them. Rather than drawing on the sender/receiver or 'transmission' model which is the staple of most communication texts, the framework is based on Barnett Pearce's theoretical text on communication as 'making social worlds' (Pearce, 1994). There are many possible versions of 'social constructionism' in sociolinguistic analysis, and most current ones are derived from feminist theory (see the review in Holmes, Stubbe and Vine, forthcoming, which draws on LWP data). I have focused on Pearce's model because, while relatively simple, it is capable of being used with great theoretical sophistication. I have found that his concepts and analytic strategies (based around forms of

conversational analysis) are quickly meaningful to practitioners who can use them to reflect on their own communication practices. Pearce also avoids what Jeffrey Nealon has warningly called 'platitudinous social constructionism' (Nealon, 1994) by spelling out his philosophical assumptions and theoretical sources for scholars who want to further re-think what communication does.

3. Action research

If 'social constructionism' focuses our attention on how we create our worlds through communication, action/reflection models similarly provide a critical space from which workplace practitioners can reflect on their own actions. 'Action research' has a developmental aim based on *practitioner* objectives: "from an action research perspective professional practice is a form of research and vice versa" (Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN), 1996.) Although the various forms of collaboration implied by the term 'action research' are contested by researchers (Eden and Huxham, 1996), I take the CARN position that troubling the boundaries between research and practice is the key issue. This blurring emphasises the capacity of practitioners for reflection on their own action. In the case of research on language in the workplace, it invites them to use versions of the analytic tools used by LWP researchers to inquire into the communication issues practitioners identify as most important. The 'conclusions' of action research open up questions for further inquiry and action, so it is "is change-oriented without being prescriptive" (CARN, 1996).

4. Concepts of competence

The concept of 'competence' is also a key issue in creating connections between 'communication' and organisational issues more broadly, because of the now ubiquitous discourse of competence as an organisational quality, or 'core competency' (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), as well as an individual one. The discourse of 'competence' implicates individual skills and knowledges in organisational strategies (Doving, 1996).

In work already produced by the LWP project, the approach has been descriptive rather than prescriptive (Holmes 1998, Holmes forthcoming, Holmes et al forthcoming). Unlike some versions of communication 'competence' produced in the organisational communication literature, competence is not seen here as "a list of things that you know or can do" (Pearce, 1994, p. 81), but rather as "an ability to perform in unique ways that are responsive to the demands of specific situations" (ibid., p. 85). Pearce's work is valuable here in that he extends this thinking about competence to theorise it as "the relationship between what each communicator can do and the game-like pattern of social interaction in which he or she acts" (ibid., pp. 81-82). The analytic framework he uses provides ways to represent these "game-like patterns" within the context of broader social and organisational discourses (or 'conversations' (ibid., pp. 40-41), as well as in terms of 'speech acts'. In this way he provides valuable tools for practitioner

reflection on organisational issues: in action research terms, creating explanations for communication practices that "may lie in the broader institutional, social, and political context" (CARN, 1996). This kind of analysis does not seek to discover and enforce the 'rules' which define competence, but rather "problematises the assumptions and beliefs (theories) which tacitly underpin professional practice" (ibid.). The possibility opens up of problematising the assumptions of broader organisational 'competencies' (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), as well as individual practices.

Next steps

Pearce's approach to communication 'competence' provides a powerful link between practitioner concerns and sociolinguistics concepts, while extending both. It is theoretically satisfying in terms of the social constructionist trends in sociolinguistic research, as well as providing the basis for further developments within this agenda drawn from action research. It theorises an action reflection model for communication evaluation and development, as well as contributing specific analytic tools. In the LWP project, we are currently working on various versions of this model to put into workplace practice.

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