

# Conversation As Methodology In Collaborative Action Research

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## Introduction

After nearly two decades of neglect, action research re-emerged in the 1980s as a significant form of research into practice. Teachers are being encouraged to engage in this self-reflective inquiry as part of pre- and inservice teacher education (e.g., Gore & Zeichner, 1991), masters degree programs (e.g., Feldman, 1998), and as part of educational reform efforts (e.g., Calhoun, 1994; Sagor & Curley, 1991). Action research can take on a variety of forms, as Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) have demonstrated, and can be individual or collaborative undertakings. Collaborative forms can be collaborations between teachers and outsiders, such as university researchers (Feldman, 1993a), or they can be collaborations among teachers -- what I refer to as collaborative action research.

There are a number of problematic aspects of teachers' action research, such as whether teachers should engage in research modeled on academic research (Feldman & Atkin, 1995), what counts as tests of validity (Feldman, 1994a; Watkins, 1991), and whether it is even possible for most teachers to do action research given the structure of schools (Elliott, 1991). An additional question, and the one that is not often addressed, is what is it about action research that makes it research? This has been explored to some extent by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), among others. I raise a somewhat more focused question here: What role does conversation play as research in collaborative action research?

What I intend to argue and demonstrate here is that conversation can serve as a form of research in collaborative action research. In doing so, I go beyond the idea that conversation can be an important research method to show that it can be a research methodology. Before I continue with my argument, let me first distinguish between method and methodology. Research methods are the techniques that are used by researchers. They may be qualitative or quantitative, and they include observations, interviews, surveys, and the wide range of measurements made in the sciences and social sciences. A research methodology is a stance that a researcher takes towards understanding or explaining the physical or social world. It can be distinguished by its theoretical framework or ideology, its explanatory mode or epistemology (Harding, 1989).

Conversation has long been seen as a method of research. For example, it is understood by scientists that the testing of new ideas requires a grand cooperative conversation that obeys the principles of discourse ethics (Putnam, 1995). It has also been demonstrated repeatedly that conversation, in the form of interviews (Seidman, 1991) or participant observations (Fetterman, 1989), can be a way to collect and analyze data. More recently, conversation has been recognized, from a feminist perspective, as a way to make meaning of data (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Josselson, Lieblich, Sharabany, & Wiseman, 1997).

What I argue for here, is that conversation can be a research methodology in collaborative action research. My point is not to demonstrate that conversation is a method that has been used effectively in action research -- that has been shown and documented elsewhere (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hollingsworth, 1994; Feldman, 1993b). Rather, what I intend to do here is to examine the nature of conversation to understand how conversations among teachers serve as a research methodology in which the sharing of knowledge and the growth of understanding occurs through meaning making processes.

### Conversation in collaborative action research

I begin by reviewing three examples of the use of conversation in collaborative action research. The first is what Cochran-Smith and Lytle call oral inquiry processes (1993). The second is what Sandra Hollingsworth has referred to as collaborative conversations (1994). Finally, I look at what I have begun to call long and serious conversations that take place in a model of action research called enhanced normal practice (Feldman, 1996).

After I examine each of these representations of the use of conversation, I turn to conversation itself, to look at its characteristics and purposes. In that section, I refer to the three examples of conversation in collaborative action

research that then leads me to an examination of conversation as research. In the following section of the paper I show how research occurs in oral inquiry processes, collaborative conversations, and long and serious conversations. I end by looking at some of the implications this has for establishing and sustaining collaborative action research groups.

### Oral inquiry processes

From their work with teachers and their studies of teacher research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle have proposed a four-part working typology of teacher research: journals, essays, classroom studies, and oral inquiry processes. Journals are teachers' accounts of life in their classrooms. They include observations, descriptions, and reflections. Essays are also a type of teacher writing, but while journals are primarily a reflective account of teaching and learning, when teachers write essays they construct arguments about education based on their experiences. Classroom studies are what many would think of as action research. They may be identical in form to research studies done by university faculty, with a structure that begins with problem identification or setting, data collection and analysis, and reflection upon what has been learned (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle's fourth type of teacher research is oral inquiry processes:

Oral inquiry processes are procedures in which two or more teachers jointly research their experiences by examining particular issues, educational concepts, texts (including students' work), and other data about students. ... they are by definition collaborative and oral. During oral inquiry, teachers build on one another's insights to analyze and interpret classroom data and their experiences in the school as a workplace. ... For teachers, oral inquiries provide access to a variety of perspectives for problem posing and solving. They also reveal ways in which teachers relate particular cases to theories of practice (1993, 30).

Oral inquiry processes differ from the other three types of teacher research because they are oral and because they must be collaborative. Each of the other types could be solitary activities, and while verbal, need not rely on words spoken among teachers.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle point out that oral inquiry processes are not just "teacher talk;" that for these exchanges to be research, they "follow specific theoretically grounded procedures and ... require careful preparation and collection of data, and rely on careful documentation ... (1993, 30)." As a result,

they are self-conscious, and can be self-critical, attempts by teachers to improve and understand their practice.

Rhoda Kanevsky provides an example of oral inquiry processes in a chapter of Cochran-Smith and Lytle's book (Kanevsky, 1993). In it, she describes and analyzes an oral inquiry process that is used by the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative (TLC). This group of teachers has met on a regular basis for more than twenty years as they have engaged in conversations about their students and their work as teachers. As a way to focus their conversations, they use a process called reflective conversation that was developed by Pat Carini (1986).

Kanevsky describes a descriptive review of one of her students that she presented at a TLC meeting. Because she had had concerns about the child's progress, so she decided to "present" her to the group through the descriptive review process. Kanevsky focused the review with the question, "How can I support her learning and help her grow academically (151)?" Through Kanevsky's description of the child and an examination of the child's school work, the teachers present at the meeting engaged in a conversation that centered on Kanevsky's concerns about the child and her teaching practices. In this way, by basing their conversations on descriptions of particular children, they "start with the child and then think about children in general and finally the larger issues and educational purposes (162)." As a result, Kanevsky claims that the teachers "expand their vision and that it becomes another way of looking (162)." It should be clear from this that in oral inquiry processes, conversation, which includes references to life and professional experiences, students' work and other data, is the form of the teachers' research, not just a part of it. That is, while oral inquiry processes rely on conversation as a research method, conversation is also the basis of its methodology.

### Collaborative conversations

Hollingsworth has described in detail the multi-year collaborative conversation she has joined in with urban literacy teachers (1994). The group consisted of novice teachers in urban schools in the San Francisco Bay Area who began to meet as a result of their criticisms of the traditional form of supports for new teachers, such as course work and supervision.

Hollingsworth demonstrates the way their collaborative conversations went beyond pleasant and informative chats to become a place for research in which transformative processes occurred. The open-ended and complex verbal analyses that made up the collaborative conversations were "focused on their practice-based concerns (39)," helped them to discover their "biographical connections and differences (43)," lead to the valuing of their "lived experiences

and emotions as knowledge (45)," "articulated their professional feminist voices in narrative form (46)," and helped them to move toward praxis (47). In this way, Hollingsworth connects their use of collaborative conversation to a long tradition of oral and verbal educational processes beginning with the Greeks, and including postmodern (Flax, 1990), feminist (Belenkey et al., 1986), and social constructivist perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978).

Their desire to learn to teach in urban setting brought these teachers together. Food, company, and conversation helped them to keep on meeting. And as they became aware that the group was a place for them to talk about their teaching concerns without the risk of disempowering feedback, they shared and generated their understandings about teaching in urban settings. This growth and sharing of understanding, what Hollingsworth calls relational knowledge, and which "becomes clarified in action (1994, 78)," came about through the sharing of their experiences, their reflection upon them, and by tying them to the political and social structures of their educational situations through a research model that typifies conversational methodology.

#### Long and serious conversations

My final example of conversation in collaborative action research is of my experience with the Physics Teachers Action Research Group (PTARG). In many ways the story of PTARG parallels that of the urban literacy teachers. The eight teachers involved in PTARG from 1990 through 1993, share a passion for teaching, in this case physics rather than literacy practices. They have met in each other's homes, eaten and cooked for one another, and have established PTARG meetings as safe places to examine their practices (Feldman, 1993b; 1996) through collaborative action research. There are also similarities with the oral inquiry processes that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) and Kanevsky (1993) have described. Much of what has happened in the group has been through oral exchanges about their students and their physics teaching practices.

In my study of PTARG (1993b, 1996), I described the research process in which they engage as enhanced normal practice (ENP). The primary mechanism of ENP is what I have called anecdote-telling. The teachers tell each other brief stories of practice, listen, question, and tell other anecdotes. Knowledge and understanding -- what Hollingsworth has called relational knowing -- about their teaching and educational situations grow and are shared in conversations, and they carry it back to their classrooms where they try out new ideas. They then return to the group and tell new anecdotes about how those ideas were enacted. PTARG teachers have also engaged in systematic inquiry -- similar to what Cochran-Smith and Lytle have called classroom studies -- through the collection and analysis of data to solve pedagogical problems (Erzberger et al., 1996). These three processes, anecdote-telling, the trying out of ideas, and systematic inquiry,

make up enhanced normal practice (Feldman, 1996). But at the core of ENP is conversation -- long and serious conversations -- that are of the same form as Hollingsworth's collaborative conversations and Cochran-Smith and Lytle's oral inquiry processes. Therefore, just as with the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative and the urban literacy teachers, the PTARG teachers research their practices primarily within a methodology of conversation.

In this section I have reviewed three examples of collaborative action research that rely on conversation as a mode of research and as a "glue" for maintaining the integrity of the groups. The three groups -- the Philadelphia TLC, the urban literacy teachers, and PTARG -- differ in several respects. TLC has consisted primarily of experienced elementary school teachers, the urban literacy teachers began as novices together, and the PTARG teachers are a mix of new and experienced, private and public school, urban and suburban, high school and college teachers. TLC meetings are open events and attendance may vary considerably from month to month, while the urban literacy teachers and PTARG have maintained the same group members for years. What these groups have in common are the individual teachers' commitments to the improvement of their teaching practices, and the role of conversation in their research processes. For each of these groups, conversation is not only a way that data is shared and analyzed, it is also the way in which knowledge and understanding are generated and shared. In the next section I begin an exploration of the nature of conversation and how it serves as a research methodology for these three groups.

### The characteristics of conversation

I begin my exploration of conversation by stating that I see it as something more than interchange, discourse, or talk. For interchange, discourse, or talk to be considered conversation, it must have certain characteristics. First, a conversation occurs between or among people. Second, it is a cooperative venture. Third, there is a direction to conversation. Fourth, new understanding arises through conversation. And finally, conversations, like baseball, are not governed by the clock. I will look at each of these characteristics in turn.

Obviously conversation is something that occurs among or between people. There needs to be at least two people involved, and there must be some exchange of words in the form of dialogue. This is not to say that all the exchange must be verbal: clearly non-verbal cues play an important part in human communication. And, when I refer to conversation as an exchange, I do not mean to evoke a conduit metaphor for communication in which words are the intermediaries between people that result in the transfer of thoughts,

knowledge, or feelings (Reddy, 1979). Although my language might suggest that metaphor, it will become clear later in this paper that I reject it.

Not all verbal exchanges among or between people are conversations. People engaged in conversation are not merely spouting unconnected remarks through turn-taking. Conversation suggests a connection that is sustained or sustainable and goes beyond chit-chat or chatter. There should be an exchange of views, a dialogue (Fenves, 1993), that consists of connected remarks in which the "contributions of the participants should be dovetailed [and] mutually dependent (Grice, 1975, 47)." For conversation to consist of connected remarks or utterances there must be cooperation among the participants -- they must be partners (Buchmann, 1983).

Paul Grice has identified what he calls a cooperative principle under which conversation occurs:

Make your conversational contributions such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (1975, 45).

Under this cooperative principle he has identified four categories of maxims that govern contributions to conversations. They are quantity, quality, relation, and manner. What this simply means is that first, the conversational contribution should be informative enough, but not more informative than is needed. Second, every attempt should be made to ensure that the contribution is one that is believed to be true. Third, contributions should be relevant. And finally, participants in conversations should avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity while being brief and orderly (Grice, 1975).

John Searle (1992) has also alluded to the collaborative nature of conversations in his exploration of shared intentionality:

Conversations are a paradigm of collective behavior. ... when two people greet each other and begin a conversation, they are beginning a joint activity rather than two individual activities (21-22).

Conversation is an activity that is done by people together. A person cannot be acting alone but with others: the act of conversing is a form of shared collective behavior and must be seen as such to understand the nature of conversations (Searle, 1992).

The sense of cooperation and partnership among the participants of a conversation distinguishes it from argument because conversation is not a competition, and from rhetoric, as Margaret Buchmann has argued, because participants in conversations are not necessarily attempting to use language "to convince others that something is true, right, or better (1983, 5)." Rather,

In conversation, ideas collide and mingle with other ideas and are diluted and complicated in the process. ... In conversation, one may differ and still not disagree ... People do not insist that partners follow, it is enough that they enter into conversation. Thus conversation is a great respecter of differences (Buchmann, 1983, 21).

It is this cooperative aspect of conversations among participants as partners in the endeavor that allows conversations to have direction but not to be directed solely by one participant. Participants can enter into conversation with very different goals or directions in mind. It is through its reciprocal quality, the range of responses that can occur within the cooperative principle, and conversation's respect for differences among people and the assumption of good faith, that allow for a single conversation to arise from a multiplicity of origins.

The directional nature of conversations is due to their being an example of what John Shotter calls joint action (Shotter, 1993). There are two features of joint actions that account for the non-directive directionality of conversation. One is that as people engage in joint activities with others, they respond to the others in ways that "generate unintended and unpredictable outcomes (Shotter, 1993, 39)" due to a dissonance between their desires and actions. The joint activity, in the case of conversation, appears to have an externally caused or directive nature, while appearing to be owned by those within it (Shotter, 1993).

The other is that conversations, as joint activities, have an intentional quality: They seem to have a "'content,' as well as to 'indicate' or to be 'related to something other than or beyond itself' ... participants find themselves both immersed 'in' an already given situation, but one with a horizon to it, that makes it 'open' to their actions (Shotter, 1993, 39)."

It is in this way that it can be said that conversations have direction. Not a direction that is predetermined by one or several of the participants, but rather a direction that arises through and in conversation via a hermeneutical process (Gadamer, 1992), and is associated with the growth of understanding. The direction of the conversation is dependent on the conversation itself, and the understandings that arise among the participants as they converse:

We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it -- i.e., that it allows something to "emerge" which henceforth exists (Gadamer, 1992, 383).

The hermeneutical circle is active in conversation: As participants engage in conversation they come to new understandings that shape their responses and the direction of the conversation, which leads to different understandings of the conversation itself and the subject(s) of the conversation. Direction changes, goals change, and the participants come to new and different meanings through the conversation.

Conversation is a dialectical process as the participants share knowledge, views, understanding, and feelings while relating all to contexts and contingencies of personal and political history. It can range over many subjects and can include a variety of voices. It can lead in directions not thought of, and answer questions not asked. Participants in conversations can come close to one another, "to what they know, desire, imagine and believe in" and can reveal to them their "power of mind, good sense, and moral sentiments (Buchmann, 1983, 23)."

Conversation is not closely structured by time. Because it is hermeneutical and dialectic and not argument or rhetoric, it does not continue to a resolution but until the participants feel that it is time to move on; that it is time to end the conversation. Therefore, conversation is not a prelude or postscript to action. Conversation can lead to action, follow action, or be a part of action. Through the intermingling of conversation and action, praxis comes about with its growth of knowledge, understanding, and theory through action.

Conversations occur among people, are cooperative, have direction, result in new meaning, and are not governed by the clock. Each of these characteristics

is apparent when teachers engage in oral inquiry processes, collaborative conversations, and long and serious conversations. At the meetings described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, Hollingsworth, and myself, groups of teachers have entered into conversation. They began a cooperative process in which one of the teachers starts to talk, and the others listen. As they listen, they think about what is being said, and relate it to their own histories, their intentions, and their relations to others. Reflection occurs, and the ones who have listened, respond. The responses are answers to questions, related anecdotes and bits of narrative, or questions, which act in the evolution of the conversation's direction. Understanding grows because the teachers' conversations

involve a complex back-and-forth process of negotiations both between speaker and hearer, and between what has already been said and what currently is being said, the making use of facts and assumptions, the use of both the present context and the waiting for something said later to make clearer what was meant earlier, and the use of many other ... background features of everyday scenes (Shotter, 1993, 27)."

Finally, while group meetings are governed by the clock, the teachers' conversations are not. Conversations have continued to the next meeting, have involved new participants in school or at home, and have evolved in directions that include participants in new ways.

### Purposes of conversations

One of the significant aspects of the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Collaborative, the urban literacy teachers group, and PTARG, is that the teachers have continued to meet over an extended time. It is clear from the descriptions of these groups that there are social and political factors that help us to understand why they have stayed together. For example, they enjoy each other's company, they eat meals together, and they have found colleagues with whom they share similar ways of thinking about the nature of schooling, teaching, and learning. The conversations in which they have engaged helped to develop the bonds that have kept them together, in part by providing the participants with the pleasure that results from talking, listening, reflecting, and responding to each other. But the conversations have done more than that: They have helped to bring to light thoughts and ideas, facilitated communication with each other, helped the teachers as they have attempted to make defensible decisions about their goals and actions, and resulted in the exchange of knowledge and the generation of understanding. In this section of the paper, I will examine more deeply how conversation can lead to decision making, the exchange of knowledge, and the

growth of understanding. In doing so, I return to the idea that conversation is a meaning making process that generates understanding.

### Conversation for decision making

People may join in conversation to make decisions. Sometimes it is a personal decision, how one participant of the conversation will decide to act or choose a goal. At other times, the purpose is to make a common, cooperative, or collaborative decision. In either case, the decision is not made through a vote, or by the convincing methods of logical discourse, argument, or rhetoric, but rather through a seeking of consensus. In some ways this process is similar to practical reasoning or Aristotle's phronsis (Irwin, 1985).

Phronsis is a form of deliberation that recognizes the moral, ethical, political, and social conditions that affect human decision making. Its purpose is to work through dilemmas, quandaries, and dissonances that relate to living in the world (Dewey, 1938). It is significantly different from Aristotle's epistem--scientific reasoning -- which is equivalent to the syntactic structures (Schwab, 1978) of the scientific disciplines that are used to validate knowledge claims.

When people join in conversation to make individual or group decisions about how to act or what goals to pursue, they engage in a process that has a different purpose and a different form from epistem. But conversational decision making does not appear to be the process of deliberation that is usually thought of when one considers practical reasoning. Instead of a solitary, Hamlet-like process, modeled by Aristotle in the practical syllogism (Nussbaum, 1978) or by Gary Fenstermacher (1986) in his practical arguments, what happens instead is a search for an agreed upon meaning or understanding from which a consensus can be reached. Through talking, listening, questioning, and reflecting, the conversation process allows the participants the opportunities to develop understanding that can then be used to support decisions about the choice of goals or actions. In this way it can be seen that conversation aids in practical decision making by the clarification that arises through the meaning making that leads to understanding.

### Conversation for the exchange of knowledge

People join in conversation for pleasure, to make individual or collaborative decisions, and to gain new knowledge. It is important for me at this point to clarify what I mean by knowledge. I use it in a very particular way. Knowledge, as I will refer to it here, is the product of human activity. It consists of codifiable and categorizable chunks of "know-how" and "know-that" that can be collected and stored in compendiums or knowledge bases, and traded and sold as a commodity (Lyotard, 1979). It is what resides in Karl Popper's World 3 (Popper, 1972). In this sense of what knowledge is, it can go back and forth

among people through conversation. However, again, I must make clear that I am not suggesting a conduit model. Even though this knowledge as a commodity can, in a sense, exist separately from human beings, it must be appropriated to be useful. The words that are spoken, listened to, reflected upon, questioned and responded to do not have meanings independent of the individual participants in the conversation. For participants in conversations to gain knowledge, the listeners have to "hear" the speakers' intended meaning within their situations to appropriate it. For the commodity form of knowledge to be exchanged through conversation, it must be appropriated by the speaker and then reappropriated by the others through listening, reflecting, questioning, and responding (Wertsch, 1991).

### Conversation for understanding

In the appropriation of knowledge, something else occurs -- the participants come to understand, or construct meaning, in a new way, that is distinct from the commodity form of knowledge. Understanding is the result of making meaning in situations. My use of understanding relies on a sociocultural approach to the mind, in which human understanding and action are situated in settings that include relations with other entities, both animate and inanimate, and the history and intentions of the meaning maker and of the other people (Wertsch, 1991; Lave, 1993). It relies upon the existential notion of being as "thrown projection," where people find themselves thrown into situations from which they project themselves into new situations (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1995). Situations are more than the context that is so often referred to in contemporary research. Context suggests the stage upon, and the settings in front of, that the subject acts. Instead, people can be thought of as being immersed in their situations. It is in their being in situations that people gain new understandings through their relations with those other entities, their histories, and their intentions (Feldman, 1997; Lave, 1993).

And, it is through the process of conversation -- speaking, listening, reflecting, and speaking again -- that understanding grows in those situations that we call conversations. A conversation is a dialogic and a dialectic process. It is dialogic because in response to the spoken words, understanding arises for participants by their laying down their own answering words through a reliance on their initial understanding and reflection. In this way, participants translate in their minds (within this sociocultural perspective on mind) their own understanding of what has been said. (Wertsch, 1991). And, it is a dialectic process because through the discourse that occurs in the conversation, the new understanding that arises can transcend what was said, thought, or felt before.

In a sense, the purpose of conversation is for the participants to construct new understanding. As Gadamer has put it

Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says (Gadamer, 1992, 385).

For this to occur it is necessary for all participants in the conversation to be ready for it and to recognize the value of what they have not understood before (Gadamer, 1992). As Habermas has pointed out, in seeing a conversation in this way, as a means of coming to understand, the successfulness of a conversation can be judged according to whether understanding has been reached (Wertsch, 1991).

It is important to note that this understanding may or may not be an agreement among the participants. Understanding, in my usage, is situational, it is related to the history and intentions of the one understanding, and to the relations between the one understanding and the history and intentions of all the entities with which he or she interacts. Even if two participants in a conversation agree that they both understand, it is not necessary that they understand in the same way. Therefore, it is important to think of each participant coming to an understanding through the conversation rather than all the participants arriving at a common understanding.

So while people may enter into a conversation for a variety of purposes, all conversations result in new understandings for all participants. These new understandings can approach the trivial, or may be nearer to epiphanies. They can help conversational participants see themselves in different places or different lights, and can do the same for their views of others.

It is through the conversations that occur in the collaborative action research groups that knowledge is exchanged and new understanding grows. Knowledge is exchanged in the conversations when the teachers tell anecdotes about their practice, bring samples of their lessons and assessments or student work to meetings, and when they consult the research literature. As they talk about their stories, their work, and the research literature, their understanding grows as they listen, ask questions, and share their own stories. However, one could say that this exchange of knowledge and the growth of understanding is simply the learning that is going on among the teachers. In the next section of this paper I look at how conversation can go beyond being a learning activity and can be seen as a research methodology.

## Conversation as research

In the two preceding sections I have examined the characteristics and purposes of conversations, and I have argued that the three teacher groups have engaged in conversations with these characteristics and purposes. The question still remains of whether conversation can be a form of research in itself, in addition to being a learning experience. In this section of the article, I connect conversation with research and show that participation in conversation can be a form of research. I begin with Stenhouse's definition of research as systematic, critical inquiry made public (1975). While it is not the only way to think about research, it is certainly a good enough place to start. I will then show how participation in conversations fits my understanding of what counts as research.

### Conversation as inquiry

To inquire is to question, investigate, to look into things, to learn in a proactive sense. It is a meaning-making activity that goes beyond the learning that is an essential part of our being human (Lave and Wenger, 1991), to an active seeking of new knowledge or understanding. While conversations as ways of sharing knowledge and coming to understand are examples of Jean Lave's situated learning, it is not so clear that people always enter into conversations for that purpose, i.e., to inquire. My claim in the preceding section of this paper was that conversation always leads to new understanding. The question that I raise here is whether people enter into or join conversations to come to new understandings -- to seek new knowledge or make meaning. In some cases they do -- people seek to bring to light a thought or an idea, to exchange knowledge, and to generate understanding. When people converse for these purposes they are questioning, investigating, looking into things, and learning in a proactive sense. But what of the people who enter into conversation to make defensible decisions about goals or actions? Is this an inquiry process? Again, I would claim it is. In those instances the participants of the conversations engage in a form of inquiry similar to Dewey's practical investigations (1938) to work through the dilemmas, quandaries, and dissonances that relate to their living and being in the world.

People also enter into conversation because they gain pleasure from interacting with others in this way. They enjoy spending time with friends, relatives, and colleagues, they enjoy the closeness of being with other people that is signaled by a warm smile or a gentle touch that leads to the acknowledgment of being cared for and of caring for others (Noddings, 1984). But it is possible for people to gain these pleasures through interchanges other than conversation. For conversation to go beyond chatter, a seeking must begin, a questioning that is the essence of inquiry. It is at that point that chit-chat becomes more serious and evolves into conversation (Fenves, 1993).

What makes the conversation a conversation is the collaborative process that includes talking, listening, reflecting, and responding. In participating in this process, new understanding emerges, and that new understanding adds to the pleasure gained from the conversation. And so what I am suggesting is that while people enter into different types of interpersonal interactions to gain pleasure by being together, they do so in a conversational mode because they gain pleasure both from the conversational process and the new understanding that arises from the conversation. They enter into the conversation aware that the conversation is a seeking of a sort that will please them through the close connection with other human beings, through the conversational process itself, and by the gaining of new understanding.

### Conversation as critical inquiry

What this boils down to is that to converse is to inquire, that what makes the interchange a conversation is that inquiry occurs, and that the participants join in the conversation seeking to learn. In addition, the nature of conversation as a process of talking, listening, reflection, and responding, through questioning, anecdote-telling and other discourse genres, suggests that it is a critical process. In seeking understanding through meaning making, participants in conversations try to reach an understanding or understandings, and this "presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them (Gadamer, 1992, 387)." It is the recognition of what is alien and opposed to them, and the attempts to recognize the full value of them that makes conversation critical.

Conversation is a critical process, continuing with Gadamer's understanding of conversation, because it is hermeneutic (1992). Conversation is a moving back and forth among the conversational situation, immediate understanding, and a larger understanding of what is being said, listened to, reflected upon, and responded to. It is analogous to the hermeneutic circle and the interpretation of texts: the understanding shapes the conversation, and the conversation leads to new understanding (Dreyfus, 1991). And just as a hermeneutic reading of a text is critical, conversation is a critical way of coming to understand, i.e., critical inquiry.

### Conversation as systematic, critical inquiry made public

To be research, Stenhouse states that the inquiry process must be systematic. It is here that my analysis of conversation as research becomes more problematic. Up to this point I have argued that all conversation is both a form of inquiry and critical. While this may suggest that I will argue that all conversation is research, what I would like to suggest instead is that some conversations are research while others are not.

Some conversations are not research because they are not systematic. While all conversations have direction, it is a directionality that does not necessarily lead them forward along a particular path or toward a predictable goal. Conversation can have direction and yet be peripatetic and perambulatory in space, time, and content.

If we return again to Stenhouse's definition of research, we are reminded of a second factor that can keep conversations from being research. Stenhouse claimed that research is not only systematic and critical inquiry, it must be made public. Groups of teachers meeting on a regular basis engaged in conversation and other forms of inquiry are not engaged in research unless they have the intent to make their inquiry public. In doing so, as many teachers have done, including those of the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative, PTARG, and the urban literacy teachers, what they have learned and have come to understand about schooling, teaching, and learning can become part of Popper's World 3.

A third factor that may keep conversation from being research is that it may not be acknowledged or recognized as such by the participants. I claim that for an inquiry to be research, the ones inquiring must acknowledge that they are doing research. If this does not occur, then the inquiry cannot be made systematic. Therefore, for conversation to be research, at least one of the participants should be aware that he or she is engaged in research. For ethical reasons, the other participants should also be aware of this. Obviously there are times when people enter into conversation without knowing that it will become research. But when the conversation takes that turn, it is imperative that all participants be aware of it. It is at that point that the conversations can be made more systematic (see for example Feldman (1992; 1995)).

### Collaborative action research as conversation

I now return to look at the three collaborative action research groups. The situations of these groups, as well as the intentions of the individual teachers and their shared intentionality, act to make their conversations -- which are, like all conversation, critical inquiry -- both systematic and public.

First, by forming a group or by joining an existing one, each teacher has publicly acknowledged that she or he is engaged in research. Second, as a result, their conversations gain a sense of direction that allows them to go beyond what has been called "just teacher talk." This direction may be as result of a pre-established agenda, as when the PTARG teachers focused on alternative forms of assessment, a way of structuring conversation such as the analytic discourse (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh, 1993), or it could be the descriptive review and its associated reflective conversation that Kanevsky described in her chapter.

Third, the collaborative action research groups provide mechanisms to make public their conversational research. Their research becomes public on several levels. They are public within the group itself. Because each of these groups consists of at least half a dozen teachers, the conversations are opened to questions and critique from within.

This conversational research also becomes public when the teachers share what they have learned and come to understand with teachers outside their group. For example, teachers in these groups have published their work and made presentations at professional meetings and inservice workshops.

There is a third way in which each of these groups has made their conversational research public. They have shared it with university researchers. Teachers from the three groups have made presentations at educational research meetings such as AERA, published in academic journals, and have had their research described and analyzed by university researchers such as Cochran-Smith and Lytle, Hollingsworth, and myself.

All of these ways in which their research has become public apply to every research method that they use. But my point here has been to show that their collaborative conversations, which are long and serious oral inquiry processes, are in themselves a form of research because they are systematic, critical and public.

## Conclusion and Implications

In all three examples of collaborative action research examined in this study, teachers engaged in conversations that had the following characteristics: they were exchanges, both verbal and non-verbal among groups of people that were cooperative in nature, and had direction. At times they were engaged in other forms of discourse that were not cooperative (e.g., individual reports directed at other members of the group), or non-directional (e.g., chit-chat or small talk). The conversations served the following immediate purposes: they helped to bring to light thoughts and ideas, they facilitated communication among the participants, they resulted in the groups making defensible decisions about goals and actions, they helped to make the meetings pleasurable experiences for the teachers, and there were exchanges of knowledge and understanding.

The conversations helped to make the collections of individuals in the groups into communities: groups of people who come together with something in common and who have a sense of personhood and belonging (Shulman, 1996). As their ideas and thoughts became explicit, as it became easier for them to

communicate with one another, and as they came to consensus around goals and objectives, their sense of themselves as professionals, as human beings, and of belonging to the group was enhanced. In addition, all of this led to the growth in their enjoyment in coming together on a regular basis.

From my identification of the characteristics and purposes of conversations, I have argued that conversations in collaborative action research groups can be a form of research. I began with Stenhouse's definition of research as systematic, critical inquiry made public (1975) and then demonstrated that conversations among the three groups of teachers were systematic and critical forms of inquiry that occurred in the public sphere, and that is why new knowledge and understanding were the result, as claimed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), Hollingsworth (1994), and myself (1993b, 1996). Because conversation was not only a research method used by the teachers for data collection and analysis, but was also their stance toward research and way of generating knowledge and understanding, conversation served as the methodology for their research.

In conclusion, it appears that conversation can play a significant role in the establishment and sustention of collaborative action research groups, and that it can lead to the generation of new knowledge and understanding. This has significance for those, such as professional developers and educational reformers, who urge teachers to come together to form professional communities committed to change. First, it suggests that for these groups to be effective, the teachers need to engage in authentic conversations that have the characteristics identified in this study. Second, the conversations need to be configured so that they are effective in bringing to light thoughts and ideas, the facilitating of communication, reaching consensus, and exchanging information and sharing understanding. Third, the recognition of conversation as a valid form of research legitimizes this type of teacher talk and demonstrates that teachers talking together is a professional activity that goes beyond "just teacher talk" to the generation of new knowledge and understanding that can add to the knowledge base for teaching. In addition, its legitimation provides teachers and other practitioners with ways to engage in research that do not require the large demands of time and other resources of university-based research. Finally, it is important to note that each of the groups examined in this study consisted of teachers from different schools, and that they chose, for one reason or another, to be with other teachers in this way. The immediate outcomes of the conversations gave them reasons to stay in the group and to keep coming back. That in turn led to better conversations, and ultimately the sense of belonging that has kept all three groups going.

Notes:

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