INTRODUCTION

Conversation is an aspect of a social setting that reflects the verbalized interactions of the participants. The study of the interactions within that reconstruction is useful in ethnography. Ethnography is defined as the analytic descriptions or reconstructions of intact cultural groups (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). Educational ethnographers often assume the stance of participant-observer, becoming a member of the group who collects data that occur within the group in an identified setting (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003). One way the conversation within a group can be examined is through the use of some type of discourse analysis. In this chapter, the researchers will use an ethnographic stance to demonstrate how conversation developed within social media can be used as a base for discourse analysis.

One intention of this study, utilizing the examination of the flow of conversation, was to determine the social structure existing within the
group. Since the group would consist of students, an instructor and the author of the text under discussion, the researchers hypothesized the initial conversations might reflect the students presuming they had less power due to less expertise and assuming the stance of being expected to respond to directions. They were interested in evaluating any identifiable shifts in perceived power based on changes in turn taking in subsequent group discussions.

As teacher-researchers, they utilized these theoretical underpinnings to develop a study that would examine the reciprocal social interactions between the invited members of a book study group. Using a social networking platform, the group had conversations based on a shared understanding of a text. Those conversations were collected and analyzed for perceived shifts of power from teacher to students as their level of expertise evolved.

BACKGROUND

In an educational setting, teachers often make use of a reciprocal teaching model. The concept of reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) is grounded in the use of a conversation between teacher and students to come to a shared understanding of a text. It is the use of conversation that allows for interactive teaching of strategies for predicting, questioning and clarification, modeled first by the teacher and then transferred to the students as they take on the role of “teacher” to lead discussions. Teachers become adept at monitoring the flow of the conversation in order to understand when the students are ready to assume the leadership role. It was this type of conversation monitoring that provided the foundation for this work. As the researchers examined the research on the use of conversation analysis as an ethnographic means of discourse analysis, they were led to a broader view. Gee (2004) posited that critical approaches to discourse analysis treat social interactions in terms of “implication for things like, status, solidarity, distribution of social goods, and power” (p. 33).

Likewise, Sharrock (1989) suggested that the flow of conversation within a social structure can be used to examine who is in charge, or has the most perceived power, based on turn taking. The flow between participants who perceived themselves as equals tended to be a balance in turn taking. However, between participants who see one as having more power, the turn taking is disproportionately as response to the person with more perceived expertise. Sharrock (1989) likened this to air-traffic control, one is in charge and the others respond to directions.

By its very nature, conversation develops a detectable flow. Blimes (1988) theorized that conversation analysis should not evaluate meaning as inherent; it is not “fixed at the moment of production” (p. 162). Instead, the participants negotiate it over the natural course of the conversation. In fact, the conversation, produced by and for the participants, forms its own social structure. The participants create the structure and its features through their own interactions. As such, it doesn’t fit in a pre-designed format.

The quality of discourse within a group interaction can be analyzed. That analysis provides an opportunity to consider both the sociolinguistic and ethnographic aspects of discourse and the cognitive aspects of peer learning (Chinn, O’Donnell, & Jinks, 2000). It is possible to consider the changing patterns of self-efficacy and building of knowledge through analyzing the types of utterances within the group. To consider the uses of response patterns, one must look at the level of explanations, elaborations, and clarifications. To consider how peer discourse supports learning, one must look at individual student’s talk during interactions. “Peer discourse provides speakers with an opportunity to integrate their ideas while speaking, and listeners may receive new information that helps them construct new ideas” (Chinn et al., 2000, p. 78).