6
The Research Planning Meeting

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Introduction

In the episode to be analyzed in this chapter we see a short term challenge to the established rights and duties of people enacting roles. A tiny conflict flares up and is resolved as positions are challenged, occupied and abandoned. It all takes place within the course of a research planning meeting in a large Australian school. Four people were involved, all well acquainted with one another. Three were teachers in the school and one, the author, was a researcher from the university.

The school had been providing specialized computer classes in a computer lab for four years that all grades regularly attended. Each classroom had installed a number of internet connected computers.

The research project concerned the ways teachers could utilise a website found at www.fourmilab.ch in their classes. I, the researcher, had previously introduced the website to them. The website shows photo-like pictures of the surface of the Earth in space in real time. Mountains, deserts and the undulating seafloor can be discerned. Night and day are easily located. I also intended to investigate the meanings afforded primary aged students by the website as they interpreted the site. In the course of the meeting subtle rearrangements of rights to make plans and control the way the research material was incorporated in the teaching programme came and went.

Introducing the Three Teachers

Dot is the most senior of the three teachers and her duties include overseeing the teaching in the level three area of the school. This teaching unit encompasses two grade levels; grades three and grade four. Dot teaches in one of the grade four classrooms. There are six teachers working in this level three unit. The school structure of the school is provided in Figure 6.1.

Wyn is a member of the same teaching unit as Dot. Wyn teaches a grade three and leads the team of grade three teachers. She works with and reports to Dot
and so is accountable to Dot, who in turn is responsible to the Principal class members of staff.

Joi is the third teacher in this meeting and she is a grade five teacher. Joi is in the level four teaching unit and leads a team of three people like Wyn, and is accountable to her unit leader.

This institutional framework endows each teacher with a role and the rights and duties that it defines.

As the occupant of a role a person has certain prescribed relatively long term rights and duties, known to and generally accepted as legitimate by other members of the social order in which the role has an established place. In contrast, by establishing a position in the course of a then-and-there conversational manoeuvre, a person takes on or has thrust upon him or her a repertoire of rights and duties that are usually ephemeral. They rarely hold good (that is are taken up by the others involved) for more than the course of the episode in which they are created. In the episode to be analyzed a positioning challenge to a standing role structure opens up a small conflict. By undermining the positioning move, the senior role holder reoccupies the moral high ground momentarily conceded to the challenger.

This study also brings to light the importance of acquiring allies and supporters in even so tiny a conflict as the one to be described. For the most part, the antagonists, Wyn and Dot, amplify their resources by recruiting Joi, first for one side and then the other. In this microworld we see some of the fateful processes of the larger world played out in miniature.

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**Figure 6.1. Relative positions of the three teachers in the school structure.**