PETER NIELSEN AND BERNARD MAGEEAN

6. COMMUNICATING REAL-LIFE CLASSROOM INNOVATIONS AS RESEARCH

Writing as a teacher-researcher, one does not want to change identity from one to the other, but to retain the crucial link to practice. (Nielsen)

This is a narrative account of a particular teacher redefining his educational task through communication with research experts and colleagues. It ends with the suggestion that formal theoretical research communications about professional practice constitute a network operating and interacting with two other networks. One is the professional’s self-communicating and self-defining activity with a task and a problem. The other is essentially a validation and generalisation effort, driven by task-defining messages that are constantly sent and received in the actions of networks of professional colleagues – communications that can be promoted, planned and formalised to foster further developments and refinements of practice, pedagogical or otherwise. Research for practice should keep in view all these interacting networks.

TEACHER AND RESEARCHER, FROM WITHIN-GROUP TO WITHIN-SELF COMMUNICATIONS

Relations between teachers and researchers are matters of communication. Teachers and researchers may be thought of as accomplished performers, an audience to themselves and others, tending to respond to each other in set pieces. This may be because you become a researcher or a teacher by learning to do what researchers or teachers do. Vital verbal and nonverbal messages about identity are found in the core tasks and task-defining messages of tightly bound group networks. A key question taken up here is how to delineate task-defining messages for a possible joint teacher-researcher role. The clue lies not in group communication networks but in self-talk.

The start of the story told here is in the self-communications of a junior primary/primary teacher of Spanish to English speaking pupils. This teacher, as performer and audience, found himself in a constant inner dialogue, voicing messages of dissatisfaction about what was happening in his classroom. He had inherited a “language awareness” program with much student disengagement. His self-talk, experience suggests, indicates a professional actively building a crucial message-generating and message-sorting framework for a self-defining question:
How should I be doing this job here and now? The teacher who is responsive is always moving with this inquiry. It is a self-message with research implications.

WIDER AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION: AN EXPERT TASK-MESSAGE NETWORK

When receiving problem communication, it is natural to widen the audience. Given awareness of externally available professional and theoretical (research) messages, an obvious task was to speak directly with potential expert partners located in university departments, in the education system’s bureaucracy and in schools. This was a movement from concrete actions to systematic abstraction, with a view to affecting the ongoing concrete practical decisions in purposeful and measurable (i.e. definable and useful) ways. Accordingly, the teacher’s aim, which guided his wider dialogue with experts, was defined in concrete and practical terms as a task of getting measurable outcomes, linked to the primary school’s literacy aims, from the delivered Spanish language program.

A research-communication network emerged, with this teacher ultimately inviting messages of commentary and recommendation, principally from two expert sources. An expert in primary school literacy development was asked to help formulate systematic messages regarding pedagogical possibilities and considerations, and a research psychologist was sought to provide more abstract messages on schemes of knowing, learning and researching. In, and through, this dialogue, the would-be teacher-researcher (as he may now be called) started organising relevant literature from psychological, literacy and language studies.

Thus, it may be speculated that the ordinary intelligent actor becomes a formal research actor by actively joining in certain ongoing research-related communications, testing their implications for the problem of action in hand. In general form, the flow of communication is not different from that of ordinary intelligence in action but it is specialised in the communications of definable groups. In fact, the web of research-communication that was created was a product of some years of self-talk and critical dialogues, based on the experts’ research literature suggestions, and the teacher-researcher’s past and present professional experience. An example of a research-based, task-message for classroom action is given below. However, our interest here is not the particular content so much as how the research-communication exercise unfolds.

FROM THE EXPERT NETWORK:  
THE RESEARCH-BASED TASK-MESSAGE FOR ACTION

It was possible to identify a number of messages from research sources that could influence task analysis for the classroom action both generally and directly. The first of the messages concerned universality. Chomsky (1965) proposed that all human languages are fundamentally innate and the same universal principles underlie all of them. He contended that the grammars of human languages cannot vary freely, especially with regard to syntax. The next message concerned transference. Recent syntheses of research on second language literacy