Face-Work in Teacher Learning from Problems of Practice

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Abstract: Teachers' collaborative learning from problems of practice is beneficial to their professional development. Such learning cannot be taken for granted in the typical school culture, however, as sharing problems exposes teachers' work to scrutiny and criticism and may threaten the teachers' face. This study examines under which circumstances face-work is involved in teachers' discussion of problems of practice, based on interviews with leading teachers and observations of in-school meetings they led. Initial findings point to four major circumstances: (1) type of representation discussed (e.g., classroom video recordings, narrated case studies, or artifacts of student work); (2) group goal orientation (e.g., *developing* expertise versus *demonstrating* expertise); (3) group composition and micropolitics in terms of teacher seniority and administrative roles; and (4) group maturation over time. The study advances our understanding of the socio-emotional processes involved in teacher collaborative learning, specifically the role of face-work in group discussion of problems of practice. On a practical level, understanding how and when face-work is involved in teacher discussions can help us better design and facilitate teacher collaborative learning.

Keywords: teacher learning, professional development, face, motivation.

Teacher learning from problems of practice

Teachers' collaborative learning can be beneficial for their professional development (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Horn & Kane, 2015). Teachers' discussion of problems of practice has been shown to facilitate their collaborative professional learning (; Little & Horn, 2007) and to challenge their practice and perceptions. Such discussions enhance teachers' pedagogical reasoning by pushing them to address authentic problems, develop hypotheses that may explain them, and critically explore possible solutions (Horn, 2010). Discussions of problems of practice can facilitate teachers' understanding of the "teaching triangle": the relationship between teaching, learning and the subject matter (Little & Horn, 2007).

Collaborative discussion of problems of practice depends on teachers' *willingness* to share their classroom practice with colleagues, as well as on their *ability* to present, through classroom representations, a rich documentation of complex classroom events (Horn & Kane, 2015; Lefstein & Snell, 2013). Classroom representations, such as video and audio recordings, enable teachers to collaboratively observe, listen, pause, and revisit specific teaching moments and features that are less accessible while teaching. The use of representations can help teachers overcome the isolated character of the teaching profession, by enabling them to make their individual classroom experiences more public and accessible for collaborative deliberation (Horn & Kane, 2015; Lampert, & Ball, 1999).

Discussions of problems of practice do not necessarily take place in the typical school culture, despite their significant potential (Lortie, 1975). They expose teachers' work to scrutiny and criticism (Horn, & Kane, 2015; Little, 1990) and may therefore threaten their face (Vedder-Weiss, Segal, & Lefstein, 2019; Louie, 2016). Teachers' fear of face-threat may prevent them from sharing problems of practice or from critically examining them and thereby impede discussions that support learning. In this study, we examine under which circumstances face-work—efforts to protect one's face or the face of others—is involved in teacher discussions of problems of practice.

Face and face-work

The term "face" was introduced by Goffman (1955/1975) to refer to the positive image individuals claim for themselves during social interaction. According to Goffman, individuals present themselves in social situations by adopting a "line," a verbal or non-verbal pattern by which they express their perspective on the situation and their evaluation of the other participants as well as themselves. Though individuals are often unaware of the line they present, other participants in the interaction take this to be their position and respond accordingly (Goffman, 1955). When the line presented by an individual is rejected—when a discrepancy emerges between her line and how it is received by others—her face is either threatened or lost (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To protect or "save" face, participants engage in face-work: actions designed to maintain or reinforce their "line" (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Alternatively, participants may protect face by avoiding face-threatening interactions; for example,

teachers might avoid sharing difficulties so as not to experience face-threat. By the same token, individuals can engage in face-work in order to protect the face of *others*: for example, by refraining from mutual criticism.

When discussing teaching problems, teachers may adopt various lines. They may present themselves as *learners*, by showing curiosity, asking questions, etc. Such a line allows them to manifest lack of knowledge, ask for information, and make mistakes—behaviors consistent with the "learner" line. If other teachers also take the learner line, this enables them to disagree and criticize each other without threatening one another's face. Alternatively, teachers may present themselves as *experts*, in which case they are likely to engage in intensive face-work to protect their own face as well as the face of the other participants. In such cases, teachers are likely to avoid conflict, refrain from asking questions, "normalize" problems, and provide mostly positive mutual reinforcement, making their discussions less conducive to learning (Vedder-Weiss et al., 2019).

Various studies on teacher learning have addressed phenomena attributable to face-threat and face-work; however, face-work has not been their focus. Rather, these studies have investigated challenges in discussing problems of practice (Little & Horn, 2007), difficulties in expressing open disagreement (Grossman et al., 2001), and fear of lack of expertise (Finkelstein, Jaber, & Dini, 2018). One notable exception is the author's study (Vedder-Weiss et al., 2019), which examined teacher face-work in discussions of video-recorded classroom practice. The study found that approximately 60% of discussion time involved face-work. However, the findings are specific to the first year of video-based teacher learning and may not apply to other learning models and more mature groups. We hypothesize that face-work may be related to further aspects of teacher learning, including different types of classroom representations, personal relationships within the group, design of the learning activity, or the group maturation. This study aims to identify these aspects.

Research methods

This study is part of a large Israeli design-based implementation research on teacher pedagogical discourse. In this project, leading teachers are expected to facilitate weekly in-school meetings with colleagues in their schools. The leading teachers participate in regional professional development workshops focused on the facilitation of professional discourse. In particular, the leading teachers learn how to use conversation protocols (McDonald, 2013) to focus discussions on problems of practice and anchor them in concrete classroom representations.

This study combines interviews with leading teachers and observations of in-school meetings they led, affording a broad perspective of teachers' perceptions of their teams' interaction and a rich account of how the interaction unfolded in their meetings (Spencer-Oatey, 2013). Interviews can reveal teachers' personal perspectives, recollections, and interpretations of what happened in the meetings, as well as wider contexts not necessarily observable in the meetings themselves. While these perspectives are valuable, they are also limited in that they might reflect only the leading teachers' personal experience and not necessarily other aspects of the interactions. In addition, interviews are limited in terms of their temporal distance from the meetings. Combining them with observations of teacher meetings allows a broader and more detailed view of the events as they are perceived in addition to how they unfold (Spencer-Oatey, 2013).

Data were collected through 20 interviews with ten leading teachers who led teacher meetings in three schools during the 2014-2015 school year. Each leading teacher was interviewed twice, early and late during the year. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions about the meetings they led with the aim of exploring teachers' perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of the events (Dey, 2003). We thematicly analyzed the interview transcripts to identify key aspects of the teacher meetings relating to face-threat and face-work. This was followed by an analysis of audio-recorded observations and transcripts of 30 meetings led by the interviewed leading teachers. In this analysis, we searched for evidence confirming and disconfirming the themes we identify through the interview analysis. We used linguistic ethnographic microanalysis (Rampton, 2006) of select episodes demonstrating intensive face-work versus reduced face-work. In this proposal, we present initial findings from our analysis of the 20 interviews and of one math team meeting, in which the leading teacher presented the difficulties she encountered when teaching mathematical functions.

Initial findings

Analysis of the interviews and audio-recorded teacher meeting indicated four dimensions involved in teacher face-work during collaborative learning: (1) type of representation discussed (e.g., classroom video recordings vs. narrated case studies); (2) group goal orientation (e.g., *developing* vs. *demonstrating* expertise); (3) group composition and micropolitics in terms of teacher seniority (novice vs. veteran) and participants' administrative roles (e.g., school principal); and (4) group maturation over time.

Type of representation. Teacher collaborative learning can focus on different types of representations, including student work artifacts (exams, notebooks), narrated case studies (stories about classroom events that teachers present), and video recordings of classroom interaction. Different types of representation may expose teachers to different degrees of face-threat and thus have different implications for their discourse and learning.

By their very nature as direct documentations of teachers' work, classroom video recordings involve a greater deal of *exposure* than other types of representation. Such exposure may threaten teachers' face and lead to considerable face-work. In the interviews, teachers reported finding it most difficult to share video recordings, compared with other types of representation. They described sharing video recordings with colleagues as a "threat," something "bold," "jumping in at the deep end." A teacher volunteering to do so was described as "brave" and "exposed to criticism." One interviewee expressed the face-threat involved in sharing recordings, "[it's] very difficult for me." (Yet, interestingly, the same teacher also expressed recognition that allowing a certain degree of face-threat can promote learning: "I suddenly said, 'Wow, I love it [learning by watching the video] … [The fact that] I don't like how I look … wasn't relevant at all.")

Unlike classroom videos, narrated case studies allow teachers to control the narrative by describing the events in ways compatible with the "line" they adopted, and thus avoid face-threat. In an example from the analyzed teacher meeting, the leading teacher admitted she wanted to share with her colleagues two classroom sessions that she had found "challenging." Sharing these in her own voice, rather than through a video recording, allowed her to reveal her difficulties without resorting to face-work strategies such as criticizing her own practice or mitigating anticipated criticism.

Group goal orientation. Group goal orientation (Ames, 1992), fostered (whether intentionally or unintentionally) by the leading teacher and other participants, can impact teachers' willingness to share problems and their tendency to engage in face-work. In meetings oriented towards *performance goals*, that is, toward the demonstration of competence and excellence (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006), teachers tend to avoid sharing problems or dilemmas; they are highly concerned with face-threat and engage in intensive face-work. By contrast, when teachers are oriented towards *mastery goals* (Meece, et al., 2006), that is, when they are motivated to develop expertise, improve their teaching, and acquire knowledge, they are more likely to share dilemmas and problems with peers, are less concerned about face-threat, and engage less in face-work. As a leading teacher noted in one interview, "[w]e help each other grow … [the teachers] feel that if they turn to me I will not be judgmental, that if they turn to one another there is no judgment." The line presented by this teacher—a non-judgmental willingness to help—allowed teachers to share difficulties without fear of face-threat.

Further evidence for the connection between group goal orientation and face-work emerged from analysis of the recorded teacher meeting. The group was strongly oriented towards mastery goals, with participants asking questions, consulting, refraining from competition and success stories, and acknowledging the leading teacher for sharing her own challenges. Both the leading teacher and her colleagues adopted the line of "learners" capable of admitting difficulties, resulting in less concern about face-threat and a lesser degree of face-work.

Group composition (teacher seniority, roles, and micropolitics). Most leading teachers perform additional roles in their schools: subject coordinator, vice-principal, guidance counselor, etc. In the course of teacher team meetings, they may either emphasize their line as figures of authority or, alternatively, try to moderate hierarchical relationships by downplaying their own institutional positioning. Similarly, other teachers on the team with institutional roles can impact face-work in the meetings.

In one interview, for example, the leading teacher described how she downplayed her hierarchical position by highlighting her attention deficit disorder: "I don't work with ego. I have ADHD … I laugh at my disabilities and that creates an opening, so they're willing to hear from me." Highlighting her weaknesses signaled to the other teachers that everyone has weaknesses and that it is legitimate to share them. This mitigated the hierarchical relationship between the leading teacher and the other teachers, reducing face-work and making it easier for the other teachers to share their difficulties.

By contrast, in the teacher meeting we analyzed, the leading teacher dominated the floor. She emphasized her own expertise, sharing instructional tips and reminding the teachers of their teaching goals. When challenged by the other teachers about her teaching methods ("It's like spoon-feeding, you know?"), her face was threatened, to which she responded by referring to her superintendent's authority ("No, no, listen, I was with the superintendent, she said something like that").

Group maturation over time. The passage of time can affect the nature of discourse in teacher groups. Grossman et al. (2001) describe three consecutive stages in the maturation of teacher groups. The first stage, "pseudo-community," is characterized by conflict avoidance and the desire to create a positive atmosphere in the group. During this stage, group members avoid threatening each other's face by avoiding criticism and confrontation. In the second stage, members begin to disagree with one another, possibly posing face-threats. In the third stage, a "learning community" evolves, in which members are able to share difficulties and conflicts.

The interviewed leading teachers described the process of building trust among the teachers in their teams. Discourse in the teacher meetings changed over the year, which could be indicative of changes in face-work. For example, "[s]lowly the discussion became something [different] ... Some of us [started out saying] 'Wow! Great!' [all the time] … but [after a while] it wasn't 'great' anymore … the discussion was [now] really

about the classroom." This may represent a shift from face-work-dominated discourse (indicated by compliments such as "Wow! Great!") to a deliberative critical discourse in which teachers were less concerned with face-work and more focused on pedagogical improvement.

Study contribution

This study advances our understanding of the socio-emotional processes involved in teacher collaborative learning, specifically when discussing problems of practice using classroom representations. The study offers an initial characterization of aspects of teacher meetings involving face-work, highlighting the role of representation type, group goal orientation, group composition, and group maturation.

On a practical level, understanding how and when face-work is involved in teacher learning can offer insights into how to design and facilitate teachers' discussion of problems of practice—for example, how to adapt and mediate certain types of representation so as to restrain their face-threatening potential, or how to manage the composition of teacher learning communities (in terms of seniority and hierarchy) in ways conducive to learning.

Future research could examin how face-work in the circumstances mentioned above is involved in learning from problems of practice, and how this inhibits or promotes teacher collaborative learning.

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