**IoE paper notes – *The ‘how’ of reading: indexical repair in comments on an unfinished essay***

The material for this presentation is a bit of data that I have been kicking around for some time. I say a bit of data, because the main focus of interest today is the marker comments, which are very brief. The paper has been distributed, though, as a long text is not suitable for PP presentation. I would like to spend as much time as possible interrogating the materials, but before moving on to them, I think I should do two things, each of them briefly. First, I would like to explain how I see EM and AL cooperating, both in terms of academic writing, but here, in terms of academic reading. Second, I would like to set up the problem of the data as I see it. As per my title, this is essentially one of indexical repair. The results should be of interest to both EM and AL perspectives, and beyond.

So, why bring EM into things? What does it/can it contribute? Perhaps the first thing we should say is that EM is not a type of discourse analysis (in the narrow sense), as EM’s younger sister discipline, CA, has often been characterised. This may be true of recent work in CA, both by specialist CA-ists and by those who dabble, but in the view of many EM-ists, CA has long since lost the excitement and humanity of the early works by Sacks (Psathas 2008). No, EM (and CA at its best) is the study of practices; it is not the subjectivist micro-sociology criticised along mistaken lines by Bourdieu, Gellner, and many others. With AL as the study of literacy *practices* (Lea & Street 1998, etc.), we can quite naturally, as James Gee (1999, 2000) does, juxtapose them as movements within the practice (or social) turn. It is instructive to investigate the ‘baker’s dozen’ practice movements that Gee lists to see where and how there has been cooperation, cross-fertilisation, or polemical disagreements. Some of these linkages have still to be made, which affords opportunities for those of us with a multi- or interdisciplinary sensibility.

At a more operational level, it seems to me that EM and AL/NLS endeavour to get to some of the same places in terms of their conceptual armoury. For example, in the same paper in which he gave his list of practice disciplines, Gee writes that “If they had not from the outset, sooner or later all the social turn movements came to argue that meaning and context are mutually constitutive of each other” (2000:186). This is nowhere spelled out better than in Garfinkel’s treatment of reflexivity early on in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*: that “members’ accounts, of every sort, in all their logical modes, with all of their uses, and for every method for their assembly are *constituent features of the settings they make observable*” (1967:8, emphasis added). This understanding of *reflexivity* remains a radical one and whether in fact it has become an orthodoxy across practice movements is a moot point – I would suggest not, given the many ethnomethodological objections to the ‘heroism’ of more orthodox understandings of reflexivity in social science methods (Watson 1987, Lynch 2000, ten Have 2002) – but more to the point, it seems to me that when Gee says that “Words and context are two mirrors facing each other, infinitely and simultaneously reflecting each other” (op. cit/:186), pointing out the mutually constituting effects of text and context, he is essentially thinking of the radical EM idea of reflexivity, something that can not only be of great utility to researchers of literacy practices but that EM says we have ‘no time out’ from anyway.

Another EM idea, in the same essay, is also more or less taken from EM without credit being given. Gee’s reflections on the new capitalism lead him to think of the notion of *work* – “in the sense of human effort” (ibid.:187) – and he suggests placing this notion at the centre of NLS endeavours. This work, as he conceives it, would involve not just how language is used in a setting, although that is clearly important, but would also involve consideration of actions, interactions, the manipulation of symbols, and (causes of) affective orientations. Gee outlines his notion of work as follows:

Situations (contexts) do not just exist. Situations are rarely static or uniform, they are actively created, sustained, negotiated, resisted, and transformed moment-by-moment through ongoing *work.* It is the nature of this work that should, I argue, become crucial to the New Literacy Studies (ibid.).

This has obvious affinities with the programme of EM-ical studies of work (e.g. Garfinkel 1992). Both appear to play on this dual understanding of work as both the praxiological, in situ effort made by individuals to ‘get things done’, and as located within settings that would satisfy, for example, traditional sociological agendas of labour within industrial capitalist societies (Randall et al. 2001). With regard to the first understanding, Psathas (1995:142) suggests that, for example, a 911 call to the police is “‘worked on’ in various ways, coded, analysed, transmitted, made into a record, counted, filed, consulted, etc., all of which are matters endogenous in the work setting but are not performed solely by talk-in-interaction”. Thus, EM studies of work look to present the situated competences employed, focusing on the ‘this-ness’ of the work as it is carried out.

This mention of ‘situated’ provides another obvious convergence between EM and AL studies. An EM approach demands that we treat practices, in this case documentary practices, as being accomplished in local historical settings (Smith 1990). These local practices should be addressed on and in their own terms for how they reveal the accomplishment of social order in that setting. After all, how are we going to ascertain what the situation is other than by recourse to the members’ knowledge of the participants, including the researcher’s? Rather than the unitary and universal object or possession of a context-less literacy,[[1]](#footnote-1) we now have to look to performances of instances of reading or writing with a view to ascertaining how they may be seen as adequate to the purposes at hand within what will normally be definable settings. ~~(If this all sounds familiar to those working within AL/NLS, it is probably because we can say that they and EM studies of documentary or literacy practices have a common object, although the approach is different – there will still be overlaps, though, and it is the job of this research to find those overlaps.)~~

These three concepts cohere and can all contribute to an understanding of what the ‘how’ of reading is all about. Together they provide a certain particular direction: that we are looking for the fine-grained and detailed practices used by the reader; that the reading is adequate for a given purpose; that (or whether) the purpose/setting is understood and oriented to by the writer/reader; how features of the text and of the reading provide for a social order, or of an orderly set of actions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In terms of the problem suggested by this piece of data (the text and its reading), let us first describe it as factually as possible. The student writer has provided a short piece of writing that is submitted exactly for the purpose of obtaining feedback on it. The eventual outcome should be an anthropology essay 2000 words or so in length. The writing provided is half that length. The (feedback) comments on the page comprise three very short ‘comment boxes’ (as afforded by Microsoft Word) and a short paragraph summarising the feedback at the end of the piece.

Just to clarify what I mean by indexical repair, Digby Anderson (a figure obscure even to most EM-ists) writes of social actors:[[3]](#footnote-3) “When they accomplish orderly and continuing interactions it is through the practical repair of what they ‘know’ of the situation and of each other”. (Et cetera clauses...or are we going too far into EM terminology again? If we need it, mention Et cetera clauses, ad hoc-ing, and the lack of an ultimate referentiality to any language use.) Competent members of society have a multitude of ways of coming to terms with and making sense of indexical actions and expressions, i.e. those that are context-bound or referentially incomplete. How do these sense-making practices manifest[[4]](#footnote-4) themselves in this material?

The indexical repair that I have in mind here is not only that of the incompleteness or contexted nature of expressions (Garfinkel 1967), nor of the EM-ical observation that technical descriptions trade on commonsense categories (Sacks 1963). Both of these are present in the data. In addition, though, in this material there is a type of indexical repair that is demonstrated in the reading, which attempts – successfully, it seems – to find purpose, structural features, and even the prospects for this piece of work despite half of its material being ‘missing’. How is this repair carried out? What are the reader’s methods or practices for filling in the gaps? The ways in which we get from the essay to the reading (comments) are likely to be of interest to us all. ~~(They have the same questions amenable to them, but they may well answer them in different ways. Or perhaps: we could use the same data, but get different questions from them.)~~

On another occasion, of course, we could examine the essay itself for how it achieves its ends. Today, the comments are our focus as it is they that are the most obvious evidence of a local reading having taken place. In the time available, I want to point out just a few features of this reading that can potentially be pursued in more depth than there is the opportunity for today. Harvey Sacks once famously lectured for half a semester on a two-sentence story told by a child (“The baby cried. The mommy picked it up”, Sacks 1972), and while we have neither the time nor Sacks’ ability to draw out the most nuanced description, there is at least time to point out a few interesting features.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The first feature that I would like to draw attention to comes out of the fact that we do not have access to the original reading of the document, a phenomenology of reading or the reading-in-progress. What we have in effect is another text; the textual comments stand as proxy for ‘a reading’.[[6]](#footnote-6) As with any reading, it is clearly motivated or a ‘reading for a purpose’ (Heap 1991a). Given that it is a reading that is textually accomplished, it is reasonable to ask whether and what features of recipient design the comments themselves exhibit.[[7]](#footnote-7) I believe that despite the brevity of the comments, it is possible to draw out such design features.

First, let us consider the three comments provided in text boxes. As follows:

Good intro. Covers a lot of ground.

Again- well put- good summary.

Once again- this is very clear and well argued.

These comments appear in this order in the text; that is to say, if one follows the text in a conventional fashion (see Heap 1991a, Sharrock & Ikeya 2000) from top to bottom and left to right, then this is the order in which they will be encountered. Further, the comments are obviously designed to be read in this order; we can see this from the adverbial phrases “Again” and “Once Again”. One might also say, if asked to put these comments, randomly provided, in order, that the comment that mentioned the “intro” would come first due to the status of an introduction being whatever comes first in the essay genre.

This ordering of comments suggests a linear reading, top to bottom, of the text for two distinct reasons, the first of which is of more interest to us here.

1. *The reading of the text by the marker*. The comments are written and produced as if the reading of the text proceeded in a certain way. This way would be what might be termed a ‘close’ reading, in Digby Anderson’s terms, a “’proper’ reading where the propriety [of that reading] derives from a reading to find and follow the argument” (1978:118). The characteristics of this kind of reading would be that the piece of writing is read in the aforementioned linear fashion, from beginning to end, carefully and closely, reading every word and with a view to finding the argument, the evidence, and any other devices that support its argument or its overall plausibility. Both Anderson and James Heap point out that “there are recognisable, sanctionable, standard ways of writing and reading written language that persons can and do depend on and expect” (Heap 1991b:115), and in terms of reading academic texts, our “legitimation of critical rights” (Anderson op. cit.) depends upon a reading such as I have just described. It is not such a leap to suggest that this is also the case for markers reading student (neophyte?) texts, and even less of a leap to suggest that where the findings of this reading have to be communicated back to the student, that these features of the reading must also be communicated.

However, it is certainly the case that very few instances of reading in fact proceed in this way! Quite aside from the focus needed to carry out this ‘close’ reading on even a short student essay, the experienced marker develops a set of ‘tricks of the trade’ to facilitate and inform their reading. These techniques are referred to in academic works, in pedagogical guides and in the press: a recent THE article[[8]](#footnote-8) suggested that “Academics start reading assignments from the back”, i.e. with the list of references.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many other methods may be adopted and may even be necessary, as when dealing with footnotes or endnotes.

In short, the comments have design features that more likely reflect the ‘statusful’ reading that might be expected of the marker than they do the actual process of reading.[[10]](#footnote-10) One way of demonstrating this is through a small experiment that I tried when analysing the materials. For this, we need to note that the first comment is placed at the end of the first paragraph, and the comment delineates this as the “intro”. One way in which this delineation could be brought about is by simply characterising whatever content is in the first paragraph as the ‘introduction’, hence the comment.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, ‘opening paragraph to an essay’ and ‘introduction’ are not identical categories, and material generically suited to an introduction can appear beyond the first paragraph. I wanted to get at the ‘work’ needed to establish the limits of the introduction, without planning too much; just reading this as any assignment that I would mark. The method that I used for establishing the introduction was therefore as follows: read the first paragraph; start the following paragraph, looking for definitions, intentions, etc. (i.e. skimming and not reading closely); decide that the following paragraph had moved beyond the introduction; move back to the first paragraph and decide upon its adequacy (making any comments, etc.). I invite those present, in a clear moment, to read the beginning of this text and establish for themselves the exact work that goes into deciding the extent of the introduction.[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. *The reading of the comments by the author of the text*. Assuming that the author of the text is interested in reading the feedback on it, the comments suggest a reading in this order. The writer will therefore have to find the order of the comments and follow the text as it is attached to the comments. The nature of this reading will be a reading of the comments with checks to ascertain how the text relates to them. It is not out of the question that the student writer will look to the final comments first, but the comments structure both their own reading and the comparison of the text in juxtaposition with them. *This replicates the ostensible reading of the draft by the marker as in 1 above*.

So far we have noted a design feature that might be argued is a desirable *general* feature of a reading intended to culminate in meaningful feedback: that is, it demonstrates a linear reading where the aim is to find the argument. However, where there is a reading, we can say there is a *local* reading, and the last two comments are themselves rich in indexicals:[[13]](#footnote-13)

Once again- this is very clear and well argued.

This is fine- what there is of it! There isn’t much to add- you clearly get the main points of the readings. I would just say to make sure that you have a detailed discussion of the problems of defining the very concepts of childhood and labour in a non-ethnocentric way, as we discussed in the tutorials. With more detail this is clearly a 2:1 or even better.

It seems clear enough that the deictic “this” in the final comment refers to the entirety of the draft thus far. “This” in the final comment box is a little more puzzling, as there is no prior reference to argument or arguing. However, this comment, which I read as referring to a two-paragraph stretch between this and the previous one, includes the phrase “very clear”, which could be tied to the phrase “well put” in the second comment. This would have the effect of dividing the first two pages between introduction / summary / argument,[[14]](#footnote-14) with ‘clarity’ being a feature of the latter two.

It is tempting, on the basis of the end comments especially and in contradiction to Anderson,[[15]](#footnote-15) to conclude that there is a *co-orientation* on the part of the writer and the marker in this data. It is surely wholly justifiable to see this as an interactional event. What we do *not* have access to in this data is the classroom discussion and possibly other contact between writer and reader that would help us make more sense of these deictic expressions.[[16]](#footnote-16) In effect the ‘missing’ thousand words is repaired by an appeal to what seem to be common objects of knowledge: the “main points of the readings”; what exactly “the readings” are; the concepts “discussed in the tutorials”. The writer is treated as someone who is knowledgeable of the content and competent as an author of (student-level) academic work; i.e. as someone who understands what these deictic expressions refer to.

The second feature that I would like to discuss has already been hinted at. It is that the comment boxes orient to the document design at least as much as they do to the textual content. They do this in a number of ways, for example: through the strategic placement of the comments in the topography of the text; through the labelling of sections of the text as delineated by the comments; through assumptions that the comments do in fact coherently delineate specific and recognisable parts of the text; through the provision of attributes to these sections; and through the omission of specific comments on the content, i.e. ethnographic details or lines of argument. This perhaps should be no surprise: the text is eminently recognisable as a draft essay.[[17]](#footnote-17) James Heap (1991a:20) suggests that our reading “is carried out in terms of our beliefs and knowledge as to the type of document we have encountered, the genre of the text represented, and the open-ended, possibly changing, circumstances of our reading acts”. Put in this way, one of the most quickly recognisable features of the reading is that it orients to a genre; the essay. Recognition of and orientation to a genre, though, are contingent practices. Recently I had cause to make a series of such judgements: having given a group of students a draft essay assignment and instructed them to “make the drafts as full as possible”, I then had to make decisions about the results of this exercise as which efforts constituted a draft and which were still in note or plan form. Of course, if requested I could have sequestered features of the drafts that made them essays, but the point is that this was the ongoing ‘work’ of ‘doing genre’.[[18]](#footnote-18) I suspect that this work would be amenable to a Wittgensteinian analysis of the ‘family resemblances’ of instances of a genre; each instance will contain sufficient features for a situated judgement to be made, but *not all of* the analytically isolatable features. It seems, going both from this experience of mine and from the data presented here, that there is some kind of ‘Reader’s Maxim’ at play here (cf. Sacks’ listeners’ maxims and Grice’s speakers’ maxims[[19]](#footnote-19)), which we could summarise, *pace* Sacks, as something like:

“*If you can find generic features within a text, assume the genre is identified and conditionally orient to those features*”.

This is a not dissimilar point to Sharrock & Ikeya’s (2000:276) when they suggest that reading practices are frequently conventionalised or ‘canonical’, and “that in many respects they have a ‘ceteris paribus’ application”.

Heap further draws a distinction between *text* and *document* (1991a). He says that “Theories working with a restricted, abstract notion of materials will not account for how *text* genres are encountered and recognised based on *document* organisation” (ibid.:21).[[20]](#footnote-20) These abstract text genres “do not draw direct attention to the document, as the formatted signs that must be read” (ibid.). However, it is exactly this kind of encounter and recognition ‘in action’ that we see in the comment boxes. This is evident, as I have shown, from the localised comments. The end comments, though, tell us something as well. The comment boxes reflexively constitute the ‘structure’ of the essay, and set out the terms for its description.[[21]](#footnote-21) The end comments say nothing about the structure or organisation of the essay specifically; rather they focus upon content, pointing out an omission that can be amended and including a rather teasing comment concerning the extent of the draft. The comment “with more detail this is clearly a 2:1 or even better” provides the message that the generic conventions are considered already to be in place, that the writer has provided one tenable way of addressing the question, and that the missing detail is held ‘in abeyance’. The assumption is that detail will be added to the argument/structure, not that the argument/structure will be changed by virtue of having additional detail added to it.

In conclusion, we can make the following points:

1. The first thousand words is seen by the marker as including important organisational and design features. The next thousand words is ‘detail’.
2. The design of the comments has its own Recipient Design features; these can be seen to contribute to what a reading ‘should be’, normatively, in this setting.
3. Other design features have only a local significance and assume that the student is co-oriented to, and probably competent in addressing, the topics and discussions brought to bear in the written work.
4. The ‘readers’ maxim’ builds upon expertise in recognising genres and in orienting to document design. This is the necessary basis for comments upon content.
5. We can easily find uses here for the EM concepts mentioned at the beginning. However, most of all, I would say that we can gain ideas concerning the ‘work’ of bringing about this reading.

1. Or – “Since the advent of the NLS, …” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The only access to these embedded techniques is through ‘carefully unpacking the orderly composition of the discursive objects that embody them’” (Turner 1994:40; the quoted passage is attributed to Mike Lynch). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Have to use this term here as ‘members’ is probably one step too far for the audience at hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note to self: this is a felicitous turn of phrase: we are looking at the manifestation of a reading, and not the lived experience of the reading itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note Anderson’s (1978) comments on Sacks’ tendency to point out ‘interesting features’ seemingly at random. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Very much as the essay text is proxy for the effort and design work that has gone into producing that. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Definition? The essay draft itself exhibits recipient design; so this means we are simply looking for such design features in both texts present. By RD I mean: … [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=415107>, Tara Brabazon, Feb 9th 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. An interesting first blog comment on this was: “I don't think Brabazon should be so quick to advertise the short cuts she takes when assessing student work. I don't mark essays from the back. I always judge each individual essay, including its bibliography, on its own terms. When it comes to sources, it is always a matter of quality not quantity and the last thing I want to encourage is the bulking out of work with irrelevant/ misunderstood sources. I see enough of that in peer review.” There is evidently disagreement and divergence in how such a reading is to be brought about. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There’s a lot to be said about academic identity from this conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. But see Sharrock & Ikeya 2000:276, bottom paragraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Through close description, etc. But note also that this is dependent upon background knowledge, ideas of ‘what everyone knows.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In fact, we can say that more indexicals are introduced to repair the essay’s indexicals. Nothing unusual in this, I suppose. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Well argued, ergo an argument is present. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Although to be fair he was not considering texts with other texts on them, as here, although he did describe reading as an ‘interactional event’ (1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The possibility is there for the researcher to repair the indexicality through observation, but there would be a lot to observe! It would require getting the texts, the reactions to the texts, the interactions around the text between the writer and marker, and any classroom discussion around the topics. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Note that the draft is at no point referred to as an ‘essay’ by the marker. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. Carlin’s (2007) bibliography\*, the work of doing a bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Under the Maxim of Manner there is the prescription, “be orderly”. Here we are looking for the order, and if it can be found, orient to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I think he is talking about Flower & Hayes (1991) if anyone asks. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I.e., a cutting-out; we’re talking about these features and not others. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)