David Gates

PhD research student King's College London. Independent furniture designer and maker.

Stories from the workshop: Communicative practices amongst crafts practitioners

Abstract

My research presents the case that craft practice and language are not antithetical and maintains that professionally situated talk-in-interaction is fundamentally constitutive of craft-people's ways of knowing. I proceed from a crafts literature that maintains that 'craft and theory are like oil and water' (Dormer 1997: 219) and that 'an object that ticks all the craft boxes … may not present an interesting case for theoretical discourse' (Adamson 2007: 169). This orthodoxy has kept language and practice at a distance from each other. My critical point of departure is that this canonical view, what Gee (2004) would class as big-D Discourse(s), effectively connotes a genre from the top-down, thus predetermining what type of 'theory' and what 'theoretical case' might be. I counter this essentialising, etic, view of craft practice by locating the small-d discourses of craftspeople's talk-in-interaction through ethnographic, observation and recording. In orienting to an emic approach I argue for the vital role of language in underpinning craft knowledge. My theoretical and analytical approach to this data is grounded in narrative research and its commitment to apprehending human experience (see Bruner 1986) and revealing the realities that are bound up in spontaneous, unplanned everyday uses of language-in-practice. Drawing upon 'small story' research, orienting to emergent, ongoing tellings (see Georgakopoulou 2007), these 'stories from the workshop' can be cast against orthodox, paradigmatic, carefully written, abstract institutional Discourse(s) (see Hymes 1996).

This paper will use short transcripts of professionally-situated talk-in-interaction amongst craftspeople and present an analysis of their uses of language. I will show that language plays an important role in constituting particular epistemological standpoints that breach canonical typifications, craft epistemologies that are predicated wholly upon practical skill knowledge (for discussion see Gates 2013, forthcoming; Makovicky 2010). These social interactions go some way (in returning to the crafts literature) to address Harrod's concern about the lack of a 'common language that made sense of this multiplicity of activities' (Harrod 1999: 409) as they reveal a complex inter-disciplinary communicative nexus of meaning-making.

Introduction

My central claim, and what this research shows, is that craft practice and language are intimately entwined. I argue that locally occasioned, professionally-situated talk is fundamentally constitutive of crafts practitioners' ways of knowing in the world. Proceeding from a crafts literature that has long maintained a schism between practice and language, I argue that by orienting to an ethnographic approach – by listening to what language is used for amongst craft practitioners and by turning to discourse analysis – orthodox representations of the relationship between craft and language can be breached.

In this presentation I will take a critical position on the canonical view of the relationship between craft practice and language. I will then describe my research method and outline a theoretical and analytical perspective before moving to illustrate and discuss my case, working with examples of data. I will present an ongoing analytical sketch around a theme that circulates in my present data.

A canonical view of craft and language

The schism between making things and language has been well rehearsed in the crafts literature. Richard Sennett reminds us of the historicism of the view, drawing on Denis Diderot's words from the eighteenth century: 'among a thousand, one will be lucky to find a dozen who are capable of explaining the tools or the machinery that they use with any clarity' (Sennett 2008: 94). During the 1990s Peter Dormer, then author of some of the most visible writing on the crafts, held that 'what can only be shown cannot be written about', warning that anyone who thought otherwise would 'distort the integrity of the very subject they profess to respect' (Dormer 1997: 230).

What these views, separated by two centuries and more, are reflecting upon is the task of turning making into language – the challenge of articulating practical action, techniques, and procedures. But this really only prescribes a limit of language. I am more interested in what language *does* do. By orienting to the orthodoxy of a sharp binary between tacit and propositional knowledge, we cannot help but see craft practice in a language-less world founded wholly upon practical and procedural skills. In addition, most definitions of craft's peculiarities and particularities across multitudes of practices imply that they are bound by an observance of material matters. As Janet Koplos summarizes: 'what something is made of is always part of the point' (Koplos 2002: 82).

As a practitioner, I would argue from experience that there is a lot more to something that I will tentatively and hesitantly call 'craft knowledge' than can be reductively annexed as an epistemology of making. Nonetheless, a view has held sway that 'almost nothing that is important about a craft can be put into words … craft and theory are like oil and water' (Dormer 1997: 219). Now, whether theory is the oil or the water in Dormer's analogy, we find a more recent evocation of the status quo in Glenn Adamson's writing: 'an object that ticks all the craft boxes … may not present an interesting case for theoretical discourse' (Adamson 2007: 169). To me, this rather begs the question 'which theoretical discourse?' – surely there are a multitude of ways of approaching something theoretically.

As an art historian, Adamson offers a perspective on craft, but his words disclose the possibility that the agenda is set – the discourse has been predetermined from his perspective. Adamson and many others are writing *about* craft, not *of* craft: offering representations of something at one remove. We might refer to these texts (after James Paul Gee or Norman Fairclough) as a big-D discourse, canonical texts that connote and shape a genre or field from the top down – typically from the academy.

But in the words of educational theorist Etienne Wenger: 'There is a big difference between a lesson that is about the practice but takes place outside of it, and explanations and stories that are part of the practice and take place within it' (Wenger 1990: 100). And with this view in mind the concern of this research is to reveal how the small-d discourses, the non-canonical, the everyday professional talk of crafts practitioners, brings to light the concerns of a field from the inside.

To return to Peter Dormer just once more: His thinking was predicated upon craft knowledge being locally distributed. The examples he gave, of engineers and scientists solving problems working together, would not, I imagine, have been silent gatherings. There would have been the sound of talk, just as it permeates and underpins many of our interactions.

Methods

I too am looking at craft practices through a particular lens, looking at craft from a particular methodological standpoint. But whereas much of the established crafts literature brings with it its own agendas and concerns, this research orients to an emic, ethnographic perspective, attending to the voices of the inside of practice. In short, the job is to look for what language does 'on the ground' for the people that are using it amongst themselves.

I make relatively long field recordings, usually around two hours, of naturally occurring talk in professional settings, transcribe sections of the recordings and analyse what is going on – what people are talking about and how they are doing it. The situations that I make use of are gallery conversations, those gatherings that usually precede gallery shows, or I invite a small group of craftspeople to simply chat at one or other of their studios. The important thing, notwithstanding methodological and theoretical implications, is to capture passages of everyday, unrehearsed, naturally occurring talk. The transcripts are anonymised: my focus is on the concerns of a particular *type* of person – the contemporary crafts practitioner – rather than any revelation of any attributable biographical detail.

My concern is the collecting and analysis of spoken, naturally occurring discourse in the ongoing present. It is an 'ethnography of the now' and as such is distinct from the post-rationalisation and sequencing of events often brought to bear in biography and oral history. The analysis draws on one relatively long data strip. Its occasioning was a gallery conversation during an exhibition at a contemporary crafts gallery. This data is drawn from various points of the second hour of a two-hour event. The atmosphere was informal. Three of the exhibiting makers (this is how they categorise themselves in the data) have been joined by about ten visitors. Most of them could be described as being (loosely) in similar professional circles. After a brief description of the project – its inception and development – the artists 'open the floor' and invite all present to join in the conversation.

In this way it is less like a presentation and more of an informal chat. All are seated amongst the exhibition.

Theoretical position

Language, spoken or written, is not a neutral system for the projection and reception of information and pre-existing knowledge. Language is something we do things with and language-in-use reflects and shapes all our social practices and cultural formations. Discourse analysis is a broad term that embraces myriad ways of thinking about how language-in-use is enmeshed in social action. Seen as the practical integration of language above the level of the sentence, and experience, discourse becomes fundamental to the constitution of knowledge. As Burr observes: 'it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated' (Burr 2003: 7).

As I am trying to drill down into the concerns of working practitioners as worked up through their talk as a counterpoint to the top-down essentialism of the big-D discourse, orienting to ethnomethodology motivates a commitment to how people actualise their culture through interaction. Ethnomethodology, underpinned by social constructionism, holds that the ways in which we, as social actors, apprehend the world are historically and culturally specific – what we know is dependent upon context. Language does this through indexicality: that word use is socially produced and tacitly recognised amongst interactants. As Alain Coulon remarks: 'the sense of talk is always local and … generalisation about the meaning of a word is impossible' (Coulon 1995: 20).

The understanding of local meanings is enriched by the detail afforded by ethnographic observation. Although transcripts are artefacts and talk is loosened from its physical context and analysed elsewhere, by being present and having longitudinal knowledge of the field the text never becomes completely abstracted from context.

This work shares ideological ground with narrative research regarding motivations and standpoint. I am not, however, claiming that narrative is the sole mode deployed in crafts practitioners' talk. The data that I collect are unrehearsed, improvisatory interactions that evolve in an ongoing present. It is grounded in experience. So while not always story-form telling, there is some distance from them to what Jerome Bruner identified alongside narrative as its counter – the logico-scientific mode. The data, even when in argumentation or explicative modes, tends toward giving meaning to experience rather than seeking absolute truths.

Ambiguity and possibility figure more frequently than any positivist claims for record. And here we can draw upon Dell Hymes and his concern with the asymmetry of discourse registers – that the spontaneity and humanity of unplanned talk is ideologically dissociated from the abstract meticulousness of institutional and academic registers. Institutional leverage, prestigious discourse registers and the canonical agendas of a field's literature normatively render the concerns of lived experience relatively voiceless.

Within a general rubric of discourse and narrative research this work can be quite specifically situated in Small Story research. As co-constructed and under-represented non-canonical *practised* acts embracing tellings other than prototypical narratives, we can 'locate(s) a level and even an aesthetic for the identification and analysis of narrative: the smallness of talk, where fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world can be easily missed out on by an analytical lens which only looks out for fully fledged stories' (Georgakopoulou 2007: 146).

The joint construction of a concept of 'process' through the process of talk

If there is a generalisation that can be made across all of the data in this study, it is this: talk about making things – that is, direct reference to the techniques and procedures of craft making – figures very infrequently. This claim is counter to typifications that would have ceramicists talking amongst themselves about kiln temperatures, and woodworkers about chisel sharpening. This brings to mind Tanya Harrod's concern that, beyond discipline-specific technical literature, there was a lack of 'a common language that made sense of this multiplicity of activities' (Harrod 1999: 409). Although writing about the field of the 1970s, Harrod's words can be seen as emblematic of the disparities between the Discourse of record, and the discourse of everyday life. There would appear to be some tension between these D/discourses: very little of what is spoken about in the data is what is normatively described as 'craft knowledge' – making things, but my central claim is that talk, and craft practices are co-constitutive.

Bearing in mind this apparent tension, in this analysis I look at how the concept of 'process' is deployed in the data. Craft is, and has, normatively been defined

in terms of the relevance of materials and the ways in which they are worked. From this focus upon materials and making we might assume the position that 'process' defines the procedural implementation of technologies upon material to arrive at a more or less specified form, or making things.

During the data, explicit reference to process(es) is made twenty-four times. As a quantitative comparison the terms 'maker' and 'making' were used twenty-nine times between them in the same data. Interestingly, perhaps, the word 'craft' was used just once. In addition to direct lexical use of 'process(es)', some chunks or episodes of data allude to the concept (gradual, temporally registered emergence of work(s)) without direct lexical use. I will start by looking at how the word itself is deployed and worked with by the participants to show how the word's meaning remains fluid and mutable, yet uncontested – maintaining an apparent stability of meaning amongst the talk.

Having made the comparison between 'process(es)' and 'making/maker', I will proceed from the instances of the two terms' collocation. I will use collocation – the lexical selections made around process – as the basis for this analysis. By examining the lexical choices made around particular word uses we can start to understand what the word means to those using it at that time.

Two views: manual vs. mental

Process is collocated alongside making in two strips. In both cases it is John who is speaking:

31) that's a thing that reflects about making processes as well

63) erm, sort of dialogic kind of thing going on in the making process

At lines 31 and 63 John uses the two words together in what I would argue is a very strong association. 'Making' and 'process' register as something close to a compound word. He is aligning the act(s) of making to the notion of process through their collocation. We can see that for John the idea of process, in these two instances, is freighted with the physical actions of making, of procedural practical work. We can read this as being in line with an orthodox view on what process might mean in the crafts – as closely allied to making. But, if we think from the other end of the compound/dyad, John is signalling that making is processual: temporally registered, the fact that he has uttered the two words together is of some interest. This is because both utterances still make the same linguistic sense if 'process' is omitted. John could have just said 'making' as the subject of his speaking but instead is emphasising that, for him, making is linked to process – contingency and time.

Nothing startling can be claimed of the foregoing. In summary, the processes of craft involve making, and making is embedded in time: an orthodox understanding. John's thinking is aligned to a conventional stance and quite tightly defined. However, a few lines later the orthodoxy becomes a little unsettled as what he considers to be part of the process becomes expanded.

31) *John*: that's a thing that reflects about making processes as well, the
32) exhibition is a work in progress …
35) so the show is kind of a working process and we wanted the conversations to be part of that
36) working process so that we could have the response of people and to kind of if you like carry on
37) working with people who were coming to see it
38) *Liz*: yeah
39) as a kind of conversation thing

The making processes of line 31, perhaps orthodoxly characterised by hammering, stitching, or throwing, become more diffuse as the show, archetypically constituted as a finished, static artefact, is embraced by John's idea of process. *So the show is a kind of working process* (lines 35–6). By expanding the concept of process, it shifts away from the insular, solo workbench and into the publicly interactional realm of the gallery. It also shifts in time, from what happened *then* at the workbench to embracing the ongoing present of *now* at the gallery.

At line 35 John says *we wanted the conversations to be part of that working process.* In work outside the scope of this paper I frame this line within a general argument for the participants' view of talk being important. Here I wish to develop a particular angle. John has drawn 'making' away from the bench and into the gallery, he has moved it in time to the narrating present. Making, on his terms, has become necessarily more social and he is advocating the poly-vocal consequences of others, as invoked in lines 36–7. Here we can see making processes – as an expanded concept – being described in the terms that talk is referred to as inter-textual. This can be seen condensed in line 39, *as a kind of conversation thing,* pointing toward his utterance at line 63: *erm, sort of dialogic kind of thing going on in the making process.*

John's words can be read as a counter-narrative to craft's normative assumptions. However, his move to expand the notion of 'making process' should be tempered with his reference to 'skilled processes' at line 409, a signal that his view also is anchored in traditional approaches.

So, even with its collocation to making, John's uses of the word 'process' are still ambiguous. They represent only two uses of the twenty-four. The remaining uses – the vast majority – do not align to conventional notions of making. In fact the term can be shown to be deployed in opposition to these conventional notions of practical action.

In the following strip 'process' becomes dissociated from making as per John's usage. The concept becomes something more of a topic in its own right as a definition is worked up by Haley.

290) *Haley*: so you know it is a thinking process rather than – I think that's what it is for me it's
291) about a thinking process not an outcome.
292) *Liz*: yeah yeah
293) *Haley*: but all of our work is seen in outcomes
294) so you … 90 per cent of what I do during the year is about the thinking process
295) and the process – probably more than that actually and
296) 5 per cent is about the individual object being out there
297) um and I don't y'know even going down to how you make a living or what you do I
298) make my living from the process, not from the outcome

Although Haley makes a collocation with *thinking* (as a parallel to John's *making*), the word 'process' is used several times in this strip – it is in circulation in the discourse for longer than a single reference. As the word hangs there in the talk it is 'on offer' more for the others to use, question, or work with – it is 'up for grabs'. Despite this, Haley holds the floor and deploys 'process' on her own terms.

Haley is making a clear link between process and mental activity through the double collocation of *thinking* at 290 and 291. It would be tempting to view this as an opposing view to the shorthand view of John's 'making processes' – i.e. mental vs manual. But the opposition that Haley sets up is of *outcome(s)* (291, 293, 298). She is not distancing her position from making, as an active concept, but rather from the relative stasis of outcomes – made objects and artworks. (Elsewhere in the data Haley makes clear declarations of her affinity to materials and materiality.)

This strip can be seen as a response to what Haley can see around her. It is important that the physical context of this utterance is a gallery space, typically populated with outcomes. For her it is frustrating that *90 per cent of what (she does) during the year* (294) remains unseen and recognised (she assumes) in contrast to the *5 per cent about the individual object being out there* (296).

Alignment around process

All of the participants have spoken of the project in terms of change, contingency, and interaction. John draws together the concepts of materiality and time in the following lines:

246) dealing with
247) the kind of fluidities and the kind of way that time happens through material
248) how we kind of push stuff about to kind of make our world.

Although not explicitly referenced, John's allusion to a concept of process is clear in these lines by bringing together *material, time, fluidities,* and *make*. His attitude to making processes is echoed in his calling up of *material.* By the metaphorical use of *through*, time is made tangible, time is figuratively materialised. He invokes the group through his use of *we* and *our.* How far this group inclusivity extends beyond the artists themselves and out to a broader horizon of the other participants is unclear.

Rachel utters the following lines shortly afterwards though:

267) I mean we had [artist's name] in the library looking at material stuff but
268) this is y'know processes.

Rachel is not one of the exhibiting artists but a known associate. She runs a materials collection at a university. She is here extolling the virtue of material needing to be animated by doing things with it. We can read this as a response to John's use of *we* and *our,* aligning herself to John's signalling of a group identity (of the artists?) circulating around a concept of process.

I argued earlier that Haley voiced opposition to the static nature of exhibited outcomes. She was contrasting the invisibility of *a thinking process*

to *our work seen in outcomes.* Rachel's words are performing a similar thing in separating actions from artefacts. She uses the cultural capital/leverage of mentioning a well-known artist. But any hint of this being a boast is qualified with the almost immediate *but.* She appears to be elevating the group's advocacy of processes above the passive observer role played by the artist. The use of the contraction *y'know* could be seen as a filler but equally the personal nature of *y'* could be a strategy to align herself to the artists through this sharing of opinion and knowledge. In this way a visitor known to the artists is aligning herself to the ongoing joint construction of the concept of process. She is contributing to the group-work by identifying and aligning to their repertoire and concerns.

Throughout, the data process is frequently collocated with time. We have seen above how time is used to invoke a notion of process without 'process' itself being deployed. This is based on an assumptive view of 'time', 'material', and 'making' being a sort of recipe for what process might be. Haley's use at line 287:

287) so again this musician was very involved in process and time

can be seen as part of the work done by the group of artists throughout the data to align themselves to an ecology of practices and professions much broader than orthodox representations of craft practices afford. It is worked quite succinctly by Liz just a few lines before Haley's utterance:

269) *Liz*: to add to that its why then process is so
270) it's the star in the object isn't it it's the key that links everything
271) and then doesn't separate makers from other disciplines or from life itself because
272) we all know it's not like that.

The artists use the deployment of process to work up a collectivised worldview of adjacent practices – for example, choreography, gardening, cooking, and music. It connects them to a sphere where outcomes are often dematerialised or immaterial and is simultaneously used to distance themselves from the normative assumptions of a gallery environment.

Conclusion

Across these necessarily few examples it is immediately appreciable that there is no singular definition of 'process' to be located. Each interlocutor, not all previously known to each other prior to the occasioning of this data, has brought with them their own understanding laden with prior and current context. But between the speakers and the listeners understandings of the concept tacitly circulate and are allowed to settle, affording a facility in that moment, emerging through the relative messiness of unrehearsed situated talk.

An example of how messy and ragged talk can be can be seen in John's words. From outside of the context of the interaction the following makes no real cognitive sense. But on the ground it went uncontested, doing its work in that moment:

353) the actual processes are really quite similar but the process of going through
354) that process are quite different and I don't really see myself I don't really see much
355) difference in the working processes between …

And that is an important point: these positions are not the product of a carefully crafted manifesto or position paper, but contingent meanings worked up interactionally through the mundanity of talk. Enough resonance and meaning is afforded to get each interlocutor to the next 'now'. It is interesting that none of the uses, oscillating as they do, between concerns of temporality, materials and other differences are ever contested or disputed. Very little unpacking is requested, or offered. Meaning is made jointly through the practices of local, contextually-dependent interaction. In this way the concept has a doubly-bound investment in indexicality: certainly the speaker brings meaning along, but a new salience is forged in the mix of being there, in the now.

For these makers making meaning is construed by looking outward from the bench. In addition to orthodox characterisations of an inner dialogue with a material, language and communicative practices afford ways of world-making that extend to broader ecologies of inter-practice understandings, forging emergent and shared constellations of concerns and attitudes.

References

Adamson, G. (2007) *Thinking through Craft.* London: Berg.

Bruner, J (1986) Two modes of thought. In: *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Burr, V. (2003) *Social Constructionism, 2nd ed.* London: Routledge.

Coulon, A. (1995) *Ethnomethodology*. London: Sage.

Dormer, P. (1997) The language and practical philosophy of craft. In: P. Dormer (ed.) *The Culture of Craft*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Gates, D. (2013) History in the making: The use of talk in interdisciplinary craft practice. In: L. Sandino and M. Partington (eds)

Oral History in the Visual Arts. London: Bloomsbury.

Gates, D. (forthcoming) *The Trouble with Verbs: Tools and Language.* Madison, WI: Chipstone Foundation.

Gee, J.P. (2004) *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling.* New York: Routledge.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2007*) Small Stories, Interaction and Identities (Studies in Narrative)*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Harrod, T. (1999) *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.

Hymes, D. (1996) *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Toward an Understanding of Voice.* London: Taylor & Francis.

Koplos, J. (2002) What's crafts criticism anyway*?* In: *Exploring Contemporary Craft*. Toronto: Coach House Books, pp. 81–89.

Makovicky, N. (2010) Something to talk about: Notation and knowledge-making amongst central Slovak lace-makers*. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute Special Issue*: s80–s99.

Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman.* London: Allen Lane.

Wenger, E. (1999) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.