Inscribed objects in professional practices: An introduction

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In 2010, the *Journal of Applied Linguistics* refocused its scope by adding *and Professional Practice* to its title. This special issue is intended to contribute to this change of emphasis via two general aims: first, to accentuate that much ethnomethodological and conversation analytical (EMCA) research has concerned professional practices; and second, to tilt our gaze from talk and language to inscribed objects and their often unnoticed but crucial relevance for professional practices. The papers presented in this issue pursue empirical accounts of inscribed objects – such as documents, post-it notes, drawings, blueprints – that demonstrate their role in the reflexive constitution of these practices as professionally oriented.

We use the rather cumbersome term ‘inscribed objects’ (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Goodwin 1994, 1995) to capture more than other potentially useful terms such as ‘text’ or ‘document’. In our view, the former is often used reductively to refer only to linguistic inscription, whereas we consider inscription to denote all forms of semiotic annotations (e.g. Goodwin 2003). A further consequence of this extended notion of text is an implicit abstraction from material particulars: it does not matter *where* something is inscribed; what is important is *what* the inscription ‘says’.

The term ‘document’ does not restrict us in this way, in that we accept readily that documents might include texts, drawings, traces of manufacturing and so forth. Further, documents are clearly material objects, be they of the paper sort or electronic. However, documents are but one variety of inscribed

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objects – we do not normally think of a clown painting on a balloon as a document nor would we understand doodling on a piece of paper as the production of a document. Both, however, are inscribed objects, and central to our argument in this special issue is that one or both of these named features – ‘inscription’ and ‘object’ – in their production and later use may be relevant concerns of professionals within social practices (e.g. Nevile *et al.* 2014). For instance, writing is a recognizable and accountable activity (see papers in Mondada and Svinhufvud 2016) regardless of what is being written (Hazel and Mortensen 2014).

Inscribed objects in this special issue are furthermore to be seen as part of the material conditions for skilled professional practices. The uses of these objects by practitioners are thus accountable to standards and concerns of professions (e.g. Goodwin 2017). Within ethnomethodology this is most notably exemplified in work under the heading of ‘workplace studies’ (e.g. Luff *et al.* 2000).

EMCA has a special and somewhat elusive relationship to the idea of work understood as paid labour within which a more general category of professional practices might fall (see Button 2012 for a similar point). Rouncefield and Tolmie in a volume entitled *Ethnomethodology at Work* exemplify this:

[E]thnomethodology argues that all activities, not merely those that attract some kind of monetary reward, involve ‘work’ – they are all effortful accomplishments, often seen but unnoticed – and, following Wittgenstein, elusive as objects of inquiry precisely because they are always in front of our eyes. (Rouncefield and Tolmie 2011: xviii–xix)

Nonetheless, the Rouncefield and Tolmie volume is very much about the professional practices of engineers, project leaders, business relation managers and their everyday actions such as scheduling, holding meetings, dealing with documents and so forth. The point from an EMCA perspective is that professional practices as ‘effortful accomplishments’ are a kind of work that is also found in social life more broadly. However, this raises the question of what makes a practice a *professional* practice, other than it being an effortful accomplishment. This is an issue that EMCA needs to address.

We argue that another sort of categorial clarification is needed, namely that between paid labour which consists of professional practices and that which does not. Here we wander into a central and lively discussion within the sociology of professions on the distinction between a profession and an occupation (e.g. Evetts 2009). The typical EMCA response to this question, with which we agree, is the assertion of ethnomethodological ‘indifference’. That is to say, the distinction is not *a priori* of interest – it is of interest only in so much as it is demonstrably made manifest by the people under study. A more measured response, which we pursue here, is that given the settings we investigate are

perspicuous for what anyone might recognize as sites of professional practices, then we see them that way as well. We may be wrong of course, but we would expect members of those settings to indicate this to us!

We are still left, however, with how EMCA might go about tying practices to professions, and to this end we follow analogous EMCA work on institutional interaction. It is also here we find some recognition of the relation between effortful accomplishment and professional practice. The case in point concerns health care professions. Tying an interaction to an institution has been seen as a matter of members demonstrating an orientation to fundamental features of spoken interaction – such as overall structural organization, turn-taking, lexical choice, turn design – in distinct ways compared to ordinary, mundane interaction (Drew and Heritage 1992). Thus, we find doctor–patient consultations follow an overall organization comprised of problem presentation, history taking, physical examination, diagnosis and treatment recommendations. Doctors, for example, are recognizably doing doctoring through turn design, e.g. ‘What seems to be the matter?’ – a turn-taking system whereby the doctor is more likely to allocate turn-taking rights to the patient than *vice versa* (Heritage and Maynard 2006). Such phenomena then can be seen as the professional practices of a central health care activity. Our ambition in this special issue is to extend research that ties effortful accomplishments to professional practices and to expand the register of fundamental features of interaction to include inscribed objects and their embodied use in and for professional practices.

Within fields such as institutional ethnography (Smith 2005), EMCA (Garfinkel 1967; Watson and Seiler 1992; Castor and Cooren 2006) and activity theory (Engeström and Blackler 2005), inscribed objects generally have been analytically rendered as foundational to the ongoing ontogenesis of organizations, as technologies with practical affordances and even as material objects imbued with agency (Latour 1996). Common to these studies is the view, which we share, that the constitution and meaning of inscribed objects are contingent, dynamic issues. This calls for an analytic tool-kit that can capture the ongoing development of inscribed objects and their embodied use in real-time.

To this end, the contributors of this special issue have pursued their studies with an EMCA tool-kit. There are many characteristics of EMCA which make it particularly apt as an approach to inscribed objects, but here we draw attention to two in particular. First, and most generally, EMCA is the analytic process of tracking in detail the real-time, sequential and synchronic development of embodied social activity. If it is the *in situ* methods of one member *qua* another’s which are responsible for inscribed objects being dynamically and contingently constituted and made meaningful, then analysis of them must proceed in a likewise fashion. In EMCA, the analyst’s methods mirror member’s methods.

This entails avoiding pre-established categories, theories, elements of a context etc. unless these are evident in the member's methodic, ongoing treatment of the matter at hand. The second element we wish to highlight is what we might call an EMCA perspective on meaning. In spoken interaction, EMCA has shown how what an utterance comes to mean in social activity is dependent on what has gone before and what comes next, giving any analysis the character of what Watson (1997: 55) calls a 'reciprocal back-and-forth elaboration'.

As regards inscribed objects, we see no need to make a special case of inscribed objects in relation to speech (a point made by Clark [2005] in relation to objects generally). Thus, although inscribed objects may be inscribed with language or other conventional signs, we do not take for granted that a reading of those signs has any necessary bearing on what inscribed objects come to be in any extant case (Streeck 1996). The papers in this special issue note many occasions on which an object's sheer presence within the phenomenal field of interactants may bear on how a practice unfolds.

There are three important points of departure for our work here. First is the observation of the ubiquity of inscribed objects in human affairs. For texts as broadly understood, Watson (2009) notes as follows:

Tattoos, autographs, [...] graffiti on walls, music scores, church liturgies, drivers' licences, birth, marriage and death certificates, voting slips, degree certificates, book-keepers' accounts, stock inventories, cricket scoreboards, credit cards – these and countless other items that involve written language and diagrammatic forms indicate the immensely pervasive, widespread and institutionalised place of texts in our society.

This list also indicates the extraordinary diversity in the work done by texts – contractual commitment, ratifying work, facilitating work, record-keeping, persuasive work, identity-establishing work, and so on. In fact, one might suggest that virtually every recognisable activity in our society has its textual aspects, involving and incorporating people's monitoring of written or other textual 'signs' – texts that, in a wide variety of ways, help us to orientate ourselves to that activity, occasion or setting and to make sense of it. (Watson 2009: 7)

Second is the observation that the resourcefulness of inscribed objects is irremediably contingent; thus cookbooks, flowcharts and maps are all in some sense incomplete in themselves (Suchman 1987). They become complete, for all practical purposes, only in the concrete and specific occasions of their use (Garfinkel 1967; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Goodwin 1994, 1995). The third point is that as material artefacts, inscribed objects may be resourceful merely for their material presence. That is to say, their mere recognizability as inscribed objects of a particular type in a particular physical and social context may be resourceful, as would be stacks of forms on a desk in a public space (e.g. Hazel 2014).

This special issue consists of seven articles offering analysis of naturally occurring interaction involving inscribed objects. Two of the articles involve¹ the ubiquitous post-it, or sticky-note, used variously as a device for idea generation (Landgrebe and Marstrand) and as something which can be simultaneously but independently inscribed by several participants (Brouwer and Mortensen). Other inscribed objects discussed here include a whiteboard and laminated cards used as memory aids (Hamann), a design sketch used as a three-dimensional space for turn organization (Day) and notes used as structural components in temporal organization (Hazel). With regard to professional practices, the analyses reveal the competent use of inscribed objects in design (articles by Brouwer and Mortensen, by Day and by Landgrebe and Marstrand), the arts (Hazel) and health care (Hamann).

In typical EMCA fashion the authors are keen to show the sequential particulars of an inscribed object's deployment in interaction and how the objects are involved in social actions specifically relevant for and constitutive of the professional practices at hand. In proceeding this way, the authors are also able to establish the grounds for more general propositions concerning inscribed objects in professional practice. Landgrebe and Marstrand demonstrate how post-its become 'sharable', which may allow for a variety of functions such as facilitating discussion and recording outcomes, thus promoting idea generation. Day suggests that competent practice with sketches in design practices is much richer than 'reading' what is drawn upon them. Brouwer and Mortensen show how post-its are involved when individual members' actions in individual, parallel activities are interwoven with those of others. The fact that inscribed objects may become alternative semiotic resources to that of verbal productions is demonstrated by Hamann, while Hazel shows how notes can be much more than containers for comments – i.e., they can be powerful structuring devices for the timely flow of action in a complex activity.

We hope that the work which follows simulates interest in the careful delineation of inscribed objects in the embodied occasions of their use. Furthermore, we hope to stimulate analytic interest in tying inscribed objects to professional practices and thereby provide for better descriptions of what professional practices comprise.

Notes

- 1 The focus on sticky notes reveals the origin of the special issue in a panel titled 'Tangible objects for professional practice: Post-it notes in collaborative design activities', organized by Dennis Day and Johannes Wagner for the Fourth ALAPP conference, in Geneva 2014.

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