Making interpretive knowledge focal: developing an inter-disciplinary dialogue on research into integrated early childhood services

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Introduction

This paper presents a close look at the early stages of collaboration between two members of an inter-disciplinary research team formed to develop a proposal for research on integrated early childhood services. It lingers on processes often treated briefly in research reports, and describes strategies of reflexive exploration and dialogue that may prove useful to other researchers and professionals wishing to engage in interdisciplinary research and evaluation.

Interdisciplinary research has emerged as the preferred model for investigating collaborative service delivery for the same reasons that inter-agency ‘joined-up’ programs have been advocated. Complex social phenomena, such as the socialisation of children, and persistent social problems, such as inequities in their life chances, cannot be understood or managed from a single perspective, be it medical, psychological or sociological (Bronstein, 2002; Haddad, 2001; Wright, 2005). Fox-Wasylyshyn and colleagues articulate a hope expressed by many agencies and institutions regarding the promise of bringing together expertise from across disciplines: ‘Interdisciplinary teams can develop a collective mass of common knowledge, broaden the scope of research, and produce more clinically relevant outcomes that are sensitive to the realities of practice’ (2005 p. 34).

Interdisciplinarity is often distinguished from a multi-disciplinary approach, a distinction which is applied as much to interprofessional relationships in multi-agency settings as to research collaboration in the academy. Malin and Morrow (2007) have analysed activities in one integrated
service setting using Orelove and Sobsey’s (1991) definitions. Multidisciplinarity is defined as cooperation which maintains divisions between expertise and lines of accountability whereas interdisciplinarity is described in terms of shared information and decision making. A third category, transdisciplinarity, is defined as a form of ‘role convergence’ in which knowledge transfer occurs (Malin & Morrow, 2007 p. 452). In this paper, we will not distinguish between inter- and trans-disciplinarity; the majority of the literature referred to uses the term ‘interdisciplinary’ and our experience of research collaboration described here does not support such a distinction, although it may be useful in a service setting.

A further distinction has been made between disciplines and ‘fields of study’. Ivanic (1997) argued for the latter term in her study of students’ socialisation into academic writing since academic ‘discourse communities’ may have greater specificity than the broad construction of the discipline may allow for.

A further objection to the term ‘discipline’, specifically when referring to the field of education, has been stated by Leonardo (2004) based on the notion that, along with the characteristic object of study, methodology is at the heart of the construct of the discipline. Since the field of education ‘is a borrower discipline for its appropriate methodologies’, (p. 4) from this perspective it does not qualify to be termed a discipline. This point about the interdisciplinary nature of some fields of study is relevant to our discussion, and applies equally to social work, the other field of study in focus here. However, we will continue to use the term ‘discipline’ for the reason that it is the inter-relationship between the two which is expressed in the term ‘interdisciplinarity’.

**Interpretive Knowledge in Interdisciplinary Research**

Perhaps one of the most useful discussions of interdisciplinary research was offered over thirty years ago by educational researcher Hugh Petrie. In this paper, Petrie (1976) discusses the epistemological issues involved in bringing together researchers from different disciplines in order to develop and carry out a research project. He refers to the ‘cognitive maps’ which disciplines make available to researchers, defining these in terms of
‘the whole paradigmatic and perceptual apparatus used by any given discipline’ (p. 11). He focuses on the disciplinary ‘categories of observation’, an aspect of the cognitive map particularly relevant to a research area like education, in which observation of events in natural settings such as classrooms, rather than experimentation, is a key source of evidence. Likewise, social work research, which is practice-based and reflexive in orientation, relies on observations of practice as well as narrative discussions about practice, in the production of data.

Petrie argues that researchers in interdisciplinary teams need to ‘learn the observational categories’ of disciplines other than their own and that to do this each team member must be willing to ‘make this interpretive knowledge focal’ (1976, p. 12). This does suggest that the researcher is fully aware of the way her or his cognitive map operates to frame interpretations and can then explicitly teach this to colleagues from other fields. Similarly, in relation to interprofessional collaboration in service settings, Wilmot advises that team members ‘need to be clear about their own professional values, and communicate these honestly ... Likewise they need to know the values of the other group’ (1995, p. 259). Yet Wilmot goes on to acknowledge the difficulty of consciously knowing values that have been internalised, stating that ‘the process whereby people articulate and draw out individual values will be crucial’ (p. 264). This suggests that reflexivity is necessary in order to articulate one’s interpretive categories or values to others.

Agee’s (2002) discussion of multiple lenses for interpreting social settings is helpful for considering the challenge of making interpretive knowledge focal. She points out that ‘[r]esearchers who enter familiar settings ... begin their work with layers of assumptions’ (p. 571). This is perhaps particularly pertinent to researchers working in disciplines with strong links to practice, such as social work and education, in which many researchers have followed a trajectory from working in the practice setting through postgraduate study and into the academy. A crucial task for the researcher is ‘to discover and situate his or her own perspectives on a setting’ (p. 572). This task is surely even more complex for an interdisciplinary research team investigating a multi-agency setting where each member of the team is simultaneously an insider and an outsider.

Some insights into accomplishing this kind of collaborative interpretive work across disciplinary boundaries are available. One report of interdis-
ciplinary research on an integrated education/health service compares the collaborative processes undertaken by the researchers on the one hand, and the service providers on the other. In the former case, dialogue about interpretive knowledge was a feature of the research process, particularly in the early stages where ‘interdisciplinary and personal communication, philosophical models, and boundaries were issues’ debated in team meetings (Hinojosa et al., 2001, p. 210). This was in contrast to the service setting where meetings consisted of ‘separate professionals report[ing] on their findings or goals with limited discussion’ (p. 214).

Two members of a research collaboration evaluating an arts program co-authored a paper to explore why research conversations in the group so often seemed to run parallel rather than being genuinely dialogic (Gurstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002). Although members of the team came from different fields within education (for example, special education, educational leadership, arts), it did not appear that interpretive knowledge was ever made focal. Rather, each researcher came to team meetings prepared to speak to a summary of his or her observations in a site. The authors report that the ability to appreciate an alternative perspective came about, not so much through conversation at team meetings but through moments of encounter with another’s data. It could be that encountering unfamiliar data created the impetus for the researcher to draw on her or his interpretive resources whereas listening to a report did not. This paper also suggests that the possibility of acknowledging and exploring different perspectives through collaborative writing is a fruitful strategy.

Edelsky and Boyd (1993) used collaborative writing as a means of exploring their own research collaboration. While disciplinary differences were not involved in this case, the participants had different roles in the research, one as a practitioner-researcher and the other as an academic researcher. They note:

> Collaborative research … may be a phenomenon with a too-smooth exterior that masks internal contradictions and tensions. … Because collaborative research is neither simple nor unambiguously satisfying, it is a phenomenon that is best viewed from more than one perspective (p. 5).

For this reason, they chose to write both in personal voices, as ‘Carol’ and ‘Chris’ and as a collective ‘we’. This writing approach is unusual in the literature on interdisciplinary collaboration, which, despite its subject,
is almost uniformly written in a consensus singular voice. Although we have not chosen to write in individual first-person voices for this paper, we do write about each of ourselves as individual contributors to the collaborative process. In this way we hope to more explicitly foreground the interpretive resources that each of us brings to the task of imagining and beginning to carry out research on integrated early childhood services.

Our Collaboration

The authors are members of a larger inter-disciplinary research team that formed to develop a proposal for research into integrated early childhood and family services (currently under review). Prior to this initiative we had not worked together but, in the process of writing the proposal, we found ourselves to be the two members who spent the most time collaborating, possibly because we were on the same campus and were members of the same research institute. With the other members of the research team we shared a commitment to improving families’ access to educational and social services and opportunities. Our collaboration began because of our shared interest in families. Lana has worked with families in both a clinical and research capacity and much of her work, both as practitioner and researcher, has focused on domestic and family violence and child protection and welfare as well as on improving the quality of service responses to families and children affected by violence and abuse (Chung & Zanettino, 2006). Sue’s research with families has encompassed families’ literacy practices, parents’ beliefs about learning and families’ interactions with early childhood services (Nichols, 2000; Nichols & Read, 2002).

As Lana is a social work researcher and Sue an education researcher, we saw the Communities and Change Conference, with its explicit agenda of promoting inter-disciplinary dialogue between these two fields, as an ideal opportunity to collaborate. We decided to use this opportunity to work in a more exploratory way than is possible when writing a national competitive grant application. We hoped this dialogue could test out some strategies for research collaboration which we could then take to the larger group, should our application be successful.

Our work towards this paper was conducted in the context of very busy lives both in and out of the academy. We developed a method of working in hour long sessions which began with conversation to generate ideas. From a more
open-ended conversation we would then develop particular lines of exploration. We concluded each section by formulating specific structured tasks to achieve before next we met. After the first session, we had always completed writing which then became the focus and springboard for discussion. This writing took the form of short pieces which each of us wrote in an attempt to explicate our perspectives to the other. We collaboratively analysed these texts and then constructed synthesis or summary texts. Examples of both kinds of texts are included in this paper.

**Structuring our exploration**

To assist us to focus on the research process rather than to generalise about disciplinary knowledge, we developed a set of categories to structure our exploration of the role of disciplinary perspectives in collaborative research. At the time, we were not aware of Petrie’s (1976) list of elements of disciplines’ ‘cognitive maps’: ‘basic concepts, modes of inquiry, problem definition, observational categories, representation techniques, standards of proof, types of explanation, and general ideas of what constitutes a discipline’ (p. 11). Our categories align reasonably closely with Petrie’s list (in brackets):

- Body of knowledge (basic concepts and types of explanation)
- Research questions (problem definition)
- Boundaries of attention/framing (observational categories)
- Researcher’s positioning in social relations
- Methods (modes of inquiry)
- Sense of audience for research.

We emphasised social relationships more than Petrie, whose primary interests were epistemological.

We also discovered shared orientations towards work which related to our background in professional practice, rather than to our positions in the academy. At one point we realised that this very method of working, even as we were discussing disciplinary differences, foregrounded some shared assumptions about professional interaction. Our working sessions had strong framing through the time limit and the expectation of an outcome, but with space always made for exploration. A client consultation
and a lesson are similar in this regard. On the other hand, there are important ways in which our disciplines and histories of practice have formed each of us, and impacted on how we undertake and produce knowledge through research.

**Body of knowledge**

Summarising our statements in relation to body of knowledge, Lana located social work within the broad field of social sciences and humanities within which she also includes education. What made the discipline of social work distinctive in her view was its concern with social work practice and with generating knowledge from this practice base. Sue, on the other hand, located herself within the discipline of education rather than locating education within a larger formation. She characterised this field in a way that suggested that it was less homogenous than social work. She distinguished psychological theories from sociocultural theories and aligned herself with the latter. Our discussions relating to possible research questions and boundaries of attention are described below.

Having explored these categories we felt the need to participate in a collaborative research practice similar to what might occur in the proposed project so each of us could see the other engaged in interpretive work. As one of us had recently undertaken a pilot study in an integrated early childhood centre, and much of the data had not yet been analysed, we decided to separately read and respond to some fieldnotes and then to discuss our different interpretations.

While Petrie implies a situation where each member of an inter-disciplinary team represents and speaks for his or her discipline, our experience was not so straightforward. Through our discussions, each of us has recognised ourselves as operating both within and against our disciplines (Lather 1991). This means our inter-disciplinary collaboration could never be a situation in which each of us represented and spoke for a singular unitary discipline. In both fields there is a recurring debate about the relative value of theoretical, or academic, knowledge and professional or practical knowledge. In our discussions, we shared examples of instances of the policing of boundaries between the academic and practical domains of our fields.
Identifying research questions
When researchers identify possible research questions, their cognitive maps provide theoretical resources which direct attention to certain issues and provide the language which constitutes these issues as noteworthy or problematic. As part of our exploratory process, each of us identified possible research questions that could direct a study on integrated early childhood centres. This was despite the fact that the team had already developed a proposal which had been submitted for funding. We aimed to prompt discussion about the ways in which our fields of practice and theoretical resources made certain issues related to integrated early childhood centres salient for research. We did not aim to construct a comprehensive list of all possible questions. The combined list is presented in Table 1.

Here the influence of our different disciplinary and practice perspectives is clear. The family-centred and child-centred approaches are key frameworks for working with families and children from the social work perspective as articulated by Lana. The family-centred model seeks to understand and help individuals in the context of their families and uses an ecological systems model of practice that places the family at the centre of concern. Child-centred practice focuses on keeping the interests and wellbeing of children central to the process of working with families experiencing ongoing or entrenched conflict such as may be experienced by families and children affected by separation and divorce. Under this umbrella, Lana names specific practices including mediation, advocacy and counselling as focal for research.

Learning is the central concept from an educational perspective as articulated by Sue and is characterised in terms of relationships, content, practices and curriculum structures. This is not to suggest that family-centred practice is not a concept within education but rather to reflect the particular education focus brought to bear by this researcher.

The terms used for the human subjects of these proposed inquiries are also different. Lana names families, children, agencies and services. These terms differentiate the services from those who are served and maintain the focus on the social work practice which connects the two. Sue uses the general term ‘participants’; within this category, she indicates that different positions might be made available depending on pedagogic/curricular structures ie. learner, teacher, expert, apprentice.
Table 1. Research questions from social work and education perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social work questions</th>
<th>Education questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>How can a family-centred approach be conceptualised, developed and evaluated in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</td>
<td>What forms of pedagogy are enacted here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can a child-centred approach be conceptualised, developed and evaluated in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</td>
<td>What is being taught/learned?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the tensions between these two approaches in working with families and children in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</td>
<td>How are participants positioned in relation to learning? Are only some people teachers? Learners? Experts? Apprentices? For instance, do practitioners from the different services have opportunities to learn from each other?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the role of family mediation and advocacy in the provision of services in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</td>
<td>What kinds of official and unofficial curriculum structure practice at this site? How are these curricula negotiated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the role of family counselling/therapy in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</td>
<td>(How) do the social relations and social practices of this site enable participants to construct meaning and engage in authentic learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the role and significance of anti-oppressive practice approaches with families and children at risk?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the nature and extent of existing cooperation/coordination/collaboration/integration between agencies charged with the role of providing services to children and their families?</td>
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We can read into these questions assumptions about good and conversely problematic practice. From this social work perspective, an evaluative approach is explicitly foregrounded; good practice is family-centred and actively works against oppression. From this education perspective, good pedagogic practice aims to achieve ‘authentic learning’. It is implied that a fluid situation in which participants move between learner and teacher identities is ideal.

**Boundaries of attention**

Integrated early childhood services are sites of practice involving multiple participants, interactions, activities and structuring forces (Knapp 1995). A researcher entering such a site, whether as a participant or a more distanced observer, faces choices of where to focus attention. These decisions, whether undertaken consciously or not, construct boundaries of attention, making some aspects of the site and its happenings more likely to be noticed. Therefore, we decided to reflect on how our disciplinary perspectives might impact on how each of us would frame our observations of integrated early childhood services. Connected with this, we also considered how our professional identities could impact on our interactions with participants at sites, enabling some relationships more than others. This also could impact on what it was possible to know and how knowledge sources might be prioritised.

Sue identified herself as an experienced educator (including early childhood, school and university settings) and explained that if identifiable educational activities were in progress, this could position her in a pedagogic relationship to some participants and a collegial relationship with others. She identified health workers as professionals with whom she might have less shared knowledge and language. She also characterised herself in terms of a longstanding commitment to building knowledge of the complexity of family life.

Lana referred to her experience working with children and families in clinical as well as research settings, and her conducting of projects in the areas of domestic violence and child protection. She identified a reflexive approach that fosters ethical relationships with families as central to her positioning as a researcher. She did not identify any particular relationships which might be more difficult in the field. In addressing boundaries of attention, Lana reflected on the contribution of the social work
research literature to knowledge about interagency collaboration, making the following points:

- Research about inter-agency collaboration in social work has stemmed primarily from the domestic violence literature in Australia, the United States (the ‘Duluth’ model) and the United Kingdom in particular

- This research has tended to be evaluative in orientation (that is, evaluating the effectiveness of models of interagency collaboration against a number of criteria)

- There is a dearth of research that addresses potential partnerships between families and agencies, meaning that social work research has, even in the area of domestic and family violence, focused on a ‘single partnership’ (that is, collaborations between agencies and service providers) rather than on a ‘double partnership’ approach which seeks to develop partnerships between agencies and families as well as between agencies.

From this it appears that social work has well developed frames for observing and assessing inter-agency collaboration. An example offered by Lana was a typology of sources of conflict in inter-organisational collaboration at five levels: inter-organisational; intra-organisational; inter-professional; inter-personal; and intra-personal (Scott, 2005).

Sue did not refer to educational literature on interagency collaboration but adopted a broader frame which emphasised the relationship between practice and discourse. This is consistent with Leonardo’s discussion of education’s contribution to interdisciplinary research: ‘Inquiry into education is informed by the principal of practice’ (2004, p. 4). Her notes included the following points:

- Focus on practice. That is, what is being (not) done, (not) said in the immediate present in time and space

- Connecting with broader discourses; for example, of family, childhood, risk, professionalism

- Socio-economic status enters only in as much as it is enacted in practice or available in discourse, that is, is not an a priori category of analysis.
One possible way to understand differences in researcher orientation, as expressed through this discussion of boundaries of attention, is in terms of the movement between four phases in qualitative field work research: observation – description – interpretation – judgment. When an evaluation using pre-determined criteria is undertaken, the distance between the first and last points (observation and judgment) is often reduced. Sue’s less explicitly evaluative approach may extend this distance, keeping her in the descriptive and interpretive phases beyond the time that Lana might have moved to judgment.

Discussing our respective orientations, we came to the tentative position that social work might be a more homogenous research field with stronger framing than education. Lana spoke of the widespread adoption of feminist conceptualisations of gender and power in her field, particularly in terms of theorising domestic and family violence, and the difficulty she had experienced in attempting to introduce divergent conceptualisations, such as brain research, to understand the cumulative and developmental effects of abuse and violence. Sue explained that while there were constant moves to regulate educational discourse and practice, particularly through the specification of outcomes, the diverse nature of the field made hegemony impossible to effect. For example, different levels of education (such as early childhood or the middle years) are constituted as separate sub-fields with different conceptual influences.

Encounters with Data

In order to further explore the impact of our disciplinary perspectives on our orientations to research, we decided to each look at some examples of data taken from an integrated early childhood site. This was possible because one of us has been undertaking a research project which involves case studies of two such sites (Nichols, McInnes & Jurvansuu, 2006). The data we looked at consisted of field notes recorded at two separate events:

- A TAFE Certificate 2 in Child Care class attended by a mixture of school students and older women. Most of the group were mothers whose children were in the crèche at the integrated service. The group included several individuals for whom English was a second language including some recent migrants and refugees.
- A course on infant care attended by mothers and their babies and facilitated by a community nurse. This group all had English as a first language and were similarly aged though were from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

These activities, with their focus on parents and young children, and on the guidance of trained personnel from health and educational services, are representative of the kinds of opportunities offered to community members by integrated early childhood services. In both cases, Sue was the observer and so she had the advantage of additional contextual information about the environment within which these events took place. Her field notes include written transcripts of talk which for the most part are verbatim, though abbreviated (… indicates missing talk). The handwritten notes were typed up by a research assistant.

For a more detailed discussion of our interpretive practices, we here focus on our responses to the first event, a session from the TAFE certificate 2 course ‘Communication for child care professionals’. The topic for this class was ‘Conflict’ and the activities included discussion, a drawing exercise, role play in pairs using the script ‘I feel … because …’, and time to work on a written assignment. Some members of this group intended to train as child care professionals but others had been referred by community nurses because the course could develop knowledge of children. About half of the participants did not arrive on time and newcomers were still coming even after the class had been going for an hour.

The course took place in one of the multi-purpose rooms in the integrated centre. The group spilled out into the large central space for activities like role-plays. The crèche was at the back of this central space and during the break, mothers in the class took their children out and gave them lunch.

Two excerpts from the field notes will give a flavour of the interactions in the class. The TAFE teacher is referred to as Annie (not her real name) and the participants by initials.

**Excerpt 1**

Annie introduces conflict: What do you think causes conflict?

V: Different opinions.

B: What is ‘conflict’?
Annie: When you don’t agree.

V: Agree.

Annie: Not agree.

Annie: What else causes conflict?

V: Different style.

Annie: Style?

V: Style. Some people loud, some people quiet.

Annie: So differences with communication styles?

J: Frustration.

Annie: What about differences in values?

While we are drawing conflict pictures, Annie has knelt down to explain the task to B. – she uses example of ‘a fight with your husband’.

**Excerpt 2**

Annie puts people into pairs to work on conflict role-play – feeling statements – and asks me to help. Everyone finds it hard to use the feeling word but they are fluent at the justifying part of the statement.

A community representative has come to support B. She is very happy to meet a fellow and speak Arabic. Both have a child born in Australia.

M. is helping J. and other African woman to understand the scenario; that is, why it is wrong for someone to borrow a car and not put petrol in.

During work time M. wants to talk to me (on tape). Then one of the African women asks for help (not J) with writing about verb/non-verb communication.

I wander out to central space to start talking to V. and T. V. says the feeling statement task is ‘hard for us Asian people’ as even using ‘you’ sounds accusative. She would rather describe a situation or try and find out more.
In responding to this data, each of us used a different method and adopted a different interpretive language, though there were also similarities in some of the instances which we both found noteworthy.

**Frames and scripts: the education perspective**

Sue segmented the data into chunks, and wrote an interpretive comment on each chunk. Recurring terms in her comments were ‘frame’, ‘task’ and ‘script’. She used ‘frame’ to refer to the structure of the event in terms of time, roles of participants and interaction patterns. She attributed the framing of this event to the institutionalised nature of curriculum – in this case the curriculum of the course ‘Communication for child care practitioners’ in the program Child Care Certificate 1. She assumed that what she was observing was part of a curricular sequence in which an area of content had been divided into sub-topics, each associated with particular objectives and intended outcomes.

Comments from this perspective attended both to the ways in which this framing operated to constrain participants’ interactions and also the ways in which the frame was put under pressure by other forces within the context. Moves to reinforce the frame were often made by Annie and included starting the session although many of the participants had not yet arrived, making sure latecomers were informed where the session was up to, and using eliciting questions to focus participants on content (What are the causes of conflict?). This active framing is particularly evident when Annie builds on participants’ contributions. For instance:

Annie: What else causes conflict?

V.: Different style.

Annie: Style?

V.: Style. Some people loud, some people quiet.

Annie: So differences with communication styles?

Annie’s question establishes that the task is to complete the sentence ‘Conflict is caused by …’ and by working with what V. provides, she is able to provide the completion: ‘Conflict is caused by difference with communication styles’.
Sue sees evidence that this curriculum is framing the subject ‘conflict’ in a particular way and that this operates to include and exclude certain perspectives on conflict. Conflict is framed as an interpersonal issue which can be managed by doing work on the self. Participants’ experiences of domestic conflict are included in this frame as evidenced by this sequence of talk:

D.: The best way when you’re really frustrated with partner, kids, whatever – go for a walk.

V.: I’ll probably do some hard work, cleaning up.

B.: I go to our bedroom and of course crying and I make myself busy.

What this view excludes is an understanding of conflict as operating in the broader societal or community domain. Given that some of the participants in this event are refugees, it may be that a significant aspect of their understanding of conflict is not able to be drawn on here.

The second way in which conflict is framed is through a distinction between the personal, as in domestic, realm and the professional realm. The sequencing of the session is read by Sue as evidence that the latter is the main point. That is, participants move through the domestic realm in order to arrive at an appropriate understanding of the practitioner’s professional role in managing conflict. This is evident when Annie states: ‘When we’re a professional, conflict can sometimes be a positive thing. It’s quite different from a person conflict’. This is followed by a task which frames the appropriate response to conflict in terms of the formula ‘I feel … because …’.

This script was not readily taken up. Sue notes that, as the previous discussion had elicited a lot of emotional expression, the problem may not be participants’ lack of language for expressing feelings. Rather, the problem may be in the structure and sequencing of this formula – first the feeling and then the cause identification. This is counter to the sequence related in participants’ anecdotes regarding domestic conflict where the cause was either unstated or came before the response; for example, ‘The best way when you’re really frustrated with partner, kids, whatever – go for a walk’.

The culturally loaded nature of the script is also evidently a barrier to some. The conversation between T. and V. reveals the westernised nature
of the assumption of the right to address another in this pointed manner. Annie herself is aware of the participants’ concerns; however given the strong curricular framing, her ability to negotiate knowledge with students may well be limited.

Safety and sensitivity: the social work perspective

Lana reviewed the fieldnotes under three headings: Group discussion around conflict; conflict role-play and feeling statements; and cultural relevance and sensitivity. Under each heading, she described an instance of practice and then gave a comment. The instances were selected on the basis that they raised questions about the participants’ comfort, safety or inclusion. The first instance Lana addressed was one where Annie had defined conflict as ‘a fight with your husband’ in a one-to-one exchange with B., a participant who had earlier asked ‘what is conflict?’

Lana expressed concern that this may be an inappropriate example to use in this type of group because it had the potential to tap into personal issues that B. may not be able or willing to discuss in front of other group members, even if they were engaged in doing other things at the time such as drawing the conflict pictures. Depending on B.’s cultural background, she may also experience some discomfort in being asked to elaborate on her personal relationship with her husband as a source of conflict.

The second instance chosen for comment was the role-play task using the formula ‘I feel … because …’. Like Sue, Lana found the participants’ difficulty with this task noteworthy. She attributed this to the potentially confronting nature of talking about personal feelings for both the performer and the recipient, even though both persons in each pair knew it was only a role-play. She suggested that the activity may be culturally difficult and/or inappropriate for some group members because it required the discussion of feelings in relation to personal conflict. Noting Annie’s comment about having talked with participants about the cultural difficulties raised by the role-play task, Lana wrote these questions: ‘How did Annie respond to V.? What did she learn from her discussion with V. that she could use to set tasks that are more culturally appropriate/sensitive/inclusive?’

The apparent lack of instruction about the safety issues involved in this exercise was also noted by Lana. Such instruction should cover the need
to express feelings in a constructive way, to feel safe in doing so and being able to withdraw if feeling distressed or uncomfortable. Furthermore, there did not appear to be a period after the role-play in which participants could debrief about any residual feelings the role-play may have evoked.

**Interpretive repertoires**

The notion of an interpretive repertoire assisted us to understand our different takes on the events recorded in the observation notes. The term ‘interpretive repertoire’ is taken from conversation analysis and refers to a version of reality which finds acceptance in particular discourse communities and which is constructed through modes of representation, principally language (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The important point about a repertoire is that it may be added to; one is not required to give up a learned way of doing or seeing in order to take up another way, although some practices or interpretations may be in conflict with each other and indeed in some cases the conflict may be irresolvable.

We can see evidence of our interpretive repertoires in the different ways we have encountered and made sense of this data. Our meaning making is clearly influenced both by our disciplinary knowledge and our histories of practice in educational and social work contexts. This is evident in the different discourses we use to describe what is happening in the TAFE session. Sue uses the language of curriculum frames, scripts and tasks; she sees Annie as constrained with her students. Lana uses the language of safety and sensitivity; she sees Annie as responsible for the participants. Much of our language does not cross over, though the impact of dominant culture is an area of shared understanding.

Perhaps even more revealing of interpretive repertoires is the way each of us ‘sees’ something that is not actually there in the fieldnotes. Sue constructs a larger curriculum context within which she understands this event as a module in a sequence. Without having sighted any curriculum documents, she nevertheless sees traces of its structures in the documented interactions. Lana also ‘sees’ an absence. Around the instance of role-play, she constructs the full counselling sequence including preparation and de-brief even though only one part of this sequence is actually carried out in the event.
Conclusion

Interdisciplinary research is increasingly being recognised as an important strategy for bringing diverse perspectives to bear on complex social issues. Integrated early childhood services can benefit from an interdisciplinary research approach for two reasons. First, such services are a complex phenomenon which cannot be understood from a single disciplinary perspective. Second, practitioners working in such services, and indeed clients of such services, can generate valuable new knowledge for practice by participating in collaborative inquiry.

As all research is located in knowledge-producing communities, all research is, to a greater or lesser degree, social practice. We argue further that the nature of interdisciplinary collaborative research, by way of its methods and practices, takes the form of an ‘explicit’ social practice; an activity that not only acknowledges researchers as historically positioned, contextualised, politicised and embodied actors, but which also demands that they actively and reflexively engage with communities of practice in order to produce knowledge about (and with) these communities. In other words, research about collaborative service delivery demands that research processes and practices carry with them an implicit pedagogy about ‘how to do’ collaboration in practice settings where complex issues require multiple perspectives and interventions. In this view, the researcher needs to actively engage in practicing and modelling collaboration as much as she/he observes and records those practices and models of collaboration occurring at the various sites of research. We hope that what we have provided here is a useful starting point for researchers wanting to engage in the social practice of interdisciplinary collaborative research.

References


