When Tensions Mount: Conceptualizing Classroom Situations and the Conditions of Student-Teacher Conflict

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An enduring concern of Robert Dreeben’s work is the conditions of classroom instruction (Dreeben [1968] 2002; Barr and Dreeben 1983; Dreeben and Barr 1988). Whether it is the conditions influencing classroom goodwill (Bidwell, Chapter 3, this volume) or the compositional effects on instructional methods, Dreeben repeatedly brings readers’ attention to how the social organization of schools relates to instruction and learning. In a similar spirit, this chapter analyzes the conditions of classroom instruction and learning but approaches the problem from a different angle. Rather than examining the conditions of equilibrium and efficiency, it examines the conditions of classroom conflict. Classroom conflicts are galvanizing events that unravel the classroom order. When students argue with their teacher, rebel from authority, or resist instruction, they challenge classroom goodwill and bring instruction to a halt (Bidwell 1965; Dreeben [1968] 2002). However, conflicts or any breach for that matter are also windows into the underlying assumptions and methods that actors use to create a sense of normalcy and order (Garfinkel 1967; Wieder 1974). Hence while the focus here is on commonly occurring states of disequilibrium and disorder, the spirit is much the same as Dreeben’s attempt to understand the social (dis)organization of schooling and how it relates to instruction.

In order to understand the conditions of classroom conflict and disorder, I present a conceptualization of classroom settings that makes the multiplicity of classroom doings a starting point of exposition. Classrooms are regarded as crowded settings wherein multiple loci of interaction or situated streams of activity take place (Jackson 1968). Actors within classrooms can promote, participate in, and attend to these multiple ongoing streams of activity.
(Goffman [1974] 1986). However, not all streams of activity are related to academic work. Much of what students say and do is wholly unrelated to class tasks or school affairs, and such doing and saying often arises between students while they sit in classrooms and teacher-directed tasks take place.

Two common types of classroom activity are the focus of this paper: academic and sociable affairs. I argue that these doings are understood and interpreted by participants as distinct frameworks of interaction. These interpretive modes of (and for) action have different organizational logics whose definition is anchored in particular activities, relational patterns, form and content of communication, and status systems (Friedland and Alford 1991; Padgett 2001). More often than not, academic and sociable doings have very distinct anchors that result in opposing principles of interpretation and prescribed actions. As a result many classrooms entail competing, incompatible affairs that create latent interpersonal tensions between teacher and students and manifest in classroom conflicts.

This conceptualization of classrooms builds on research currently presented in the education literature. Most researchers describe classroom settings as having discrete segments of academic and sociable activity in which all of the participants in the classroom uniformly engage (Bossert 1979; Doyle 1986; Stodolsky 1988). The general view of classroom situations is that they arise sequentially and with clear switches. The implication is that all of the individuals in a classroom are in the same framework at the same time.

Some researchers complicate this view by suggesting that academic and sociable affairs arise in distinct arenas of the classroom, such as front-stage and back-stage arenas of discourse (or public and private: see Alton-Lee, Nuthall, and Patrick 1993). Some even describe classrooms as having multiple scripts (Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson 1995) or states of interaction (McLaren 1986) where students act in a manner either reflective of sociable or academic interpretations of affairs. While these works recognize the multiplicity of situations, they still depict collective action as uniformly flowing into one framework of interaction after another and do not describe how situations co-occur and interpenetrate.

Every classroom has multiple streams of activity that simultaneously occur and draw the attention and active involvement of participants. In many classrooms it is common for the stream of academic activity to dominate and become the primary mode by which ongoing events are interpreted. Thus during a classroom lesson like recitation, many events will be interpreted with regard to the primary track of activity that retains student involvement in recitation and pushes the task toward its completion. All sorts of subordinate tracks of activity and side-events still arise during the task, but they are usually of secondary concern to most participants and the meaning of such actions are often encased by the primary framework of the academic task (Goffman [1974] 1986). Hence a student's side comment to a peer or a teacher's bracketed joke arises as a secondary stream of activity whose meaning is framed by the main story line of recitation.
However, equally common in classroom settings is the co-occurrence of multiple primary frameworks of interaction that lack hierarchical or nested interrelation. That is, sociable and academic affairs can persist in different arenas of the classroom uninterrupted and uncorrupted by the other's existence, and without either stream's meaning being subordinated to the other. The argument of this chapter is that uniform engagement in a single collective endeavor is an uncommon occurrence in classrooms. However, even the view that classrooms have distinct arenas of interaction and interpretive frameworks is too limiting since it fails to recognize the common process by which these interpretive frames and forms of interaction co-occur and interpenetrate without clear brackets defining their boundaries.

The multiplicity of interpenetrating and competing doings is an accurate, useful conceptualization of classroom settings that helps explain how and why teachers and students behave within them. It is a useful conceptualization because it helps us understand why “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel 1967) or univocal performers of social roles are uncommon, and it helps us understand why a great deal of ambiguity, misunderstanding, and contention arise in the everyday affairs of classrooms.

Since classrooms are crowded settings, multiple arenas of discourse and activity can arise within them. As such, doings and their loci of interaction can spread, recede, dissipate, merge, and compete for adherents. Actors often move across such loci and some even perform in a multivocal fashion to multiple audiences at once (McFarland 1999). Because there are multiple groups and loci of interaction in the classroom, it is frequently the case that situations fail to have clear boundaries. Teacher-prescribed tasks can become confusing as more sociable modes of interpretation and play routines are pirated in, thereby creating mixed situations where it is hard to grasp what is happening. Likewise, tensions can mount when sociable affairs spread and their salience eclipses that of the tasks a teacher prescribes. In short, whenever teacher-prescribed tasks fail to be the primary stream of activity for the majority of classroom participants, problems tend to arise.

In what follows I conceptualize classroom settings as composed of multiple doings and describe how conflict emerges from the relationship between competing academic and sociable endeavors. In the first section, I describe academic and sociable frameworks of interaction and their organizational anchors. Following that I relate how certain frameworks come to dominate settings by the adaptations that subordinate tracks of activity make possible. In the third section, I describe how multiple primary frameworks can co-occur without any holding clear sway over the classroom as a whole. The fourth section describes how multiple primary frameworks can collide and compete for adherents, creating a great deal of discontent within the setting. In the final section, I describe how coalition formation is one means by which political actors develop classroom consensus and focus audience participation in a more uniform fashion.
FRAMES AND CLASSROOM SITUATIONS

As stated in the introduction, two common types of classroom activity are the concern of this paper: academic and sociable affairs. I argue that these doings are understood and interpreted by participants as distinct frameworks of interaction. By frame I mean principles of organization that govern the subjective meaning that actors assign to social events (Goffman [1974] 1986). Events, actions, performances, and selves do not always speak for themselves but rather depend on framing for their meaning (Branaman 1997; Steinberg 1999). We can understand the same event, action, or performance as playful or insulting depending on which interpretive frame is applied. Hence we could interpret the actions of two children rolling around on the floor shouting at each other as either fighting or play.

Frames can be applied at multiple levels of analysis. At the microlevel of talk-activities, Tannen and Wallat (1987) write of multiple frames of interaction occurring in a medical interview. There a doctor juggles multiple doings and shifts frames as she moves from one talk-activity to the next: she consults the mother, entertains the child-as-patient, and reports medical diagnoses to a camcorder recording the examination (the consultation occurred at a teaching hospital). In classrooms teachers also juggle multiple doings and frames. As they conduct the routine of recitation, they inform and elicit questions from students one moment and then shift to negative sanctions of off-task students the next. In both cases the actor’s effort is on sustaining a larger primary framework or main story line: the check-up or the lesson. All the different talk-activities, registers of talk, and so forth are part of the larger effort to sustain a role-frame of doctor-patient or teacher-student roles.

This chapter is more concerned with the collective promotion and maintenance of certain role-frames than the individual enactment of particular frames of talk-activities that Tannen and Wallat (1987) describe (see also McFarland 1999: Chapter 10). Hence what I call academic or sociable affairs really consist of a set of activities that are enacted to establish particular roles as legitimate identities of the classroom setting. In certain respects what I refer to as an academic or sociable frame of interaction is akin to what Benford and Snow (2000) call a master frame in social movements. The academic frame encapsulates various roles (teacher-student) and the talk-activities particular to them, while the sociable frame encapsulates various roles (friends-enemies) and the talk-activities particular to them (akin to McLaren’s [1986] street and student states). The primary doing in each case—whether it is doctoring, educating, or socializing—is accompanied by subordinate tracks of activity that reinforce the primary endeavor of the role-frame. Of central concern in this article is the extent to which participants promote one role-frame over another and the extent to which such promotion results in making audience members’ constituents and adherents to that framework.
Task Situations and Academic Frames

In well-behaved, highly engaged classes, there arise multiple streams of activity that are primarily interpreted from an academic frame. As such, the academic frame makes sense of various behaviors during tasks so that participants think “we are doing schoolwork.” The academic frame’s meaning or logic is anchored in certain organizational structures such as teacher-student roles, classroom tasks, the labor relations that they entail, their topics, the status rewards that they afford, and the forms of talk that teacher-prescribed tasks entail.

Academic affairs are distinct from other doings first and foremost because they concern academic topics such as math, science, English, and so on. These topics are often quite distinct from students’ lived experiences at home and in their neighborhoods. However, teachers vary in the extent to which they relate course materials to students’ lives, thereby decreasing or increasing the social distance between adolescent and subject matter (Cummins 1989; Haroutunian-Gordon 1991). In addition to relevance, course topics differ in cognitive complexity. Teachers vary in the type of knowledge that they seek from students, ranging from fact recall to opinions to problem solving to critical assessments to synopsis and metatheoretical thinking (Mehan 1979; Stodolsky 1988; McFarland 1999). The greater the cognitive demand, the greater the student involvement required. It is of little surprise that scholars find students become more committed to academic work when it entails relevant topics of greater cognitive demand (Stodolsky 1988; Boaler 1997).

The academic frame is also characterized by the formal properties of teacher-prescribed tasks and their patterns of interaction. Classroom activities generate work relations that distinguish teachers and students in interaction. Teachers utilize all sorts of activities through which subject matter is learned: lectures, recitations, discussions, seatwork, group work, student presentations, laboratory work, films, conferences, and so on (Doyle 1986; Stodolsky 1988). Most of these activities organize the learning process in one of three ways: teacher centered, student centered, and student isolated. Teacher-centered activities structure learning so that ideas and skills are transmitted from teachers and incorporated by students (Cummins 1989). Student-centered activities structure task interactions in a more reciprocal or developmental fashion, placing students more at the heart of discourse (Metz 1978). Student-isolated activities force youths to engage the materials by themselves. This third type of activity pertains most often to seatwork but also refers to individual projects and exams. Because seatwork can be either an incorporatist (e.g., crosswords and worksheets) or a developmental (e.g., essay questions and critical thinking) strategy, it is difficult to categorize. Regardless, most classes use activities that organize instruction in either teacher-centered or student-centered ways, favoring one style over the other (Hallinan 1976).

Each style of instruction defines student access to arenas of public discourse (Goffman 1981; Doyle 1986). Transmission classes make access to
public discourse the most unequal, so that competition for access and teacher praise is great. Such competition is lessened in developmental classes because student access to public discourse is more open. However, since the teacher is less central, praise is also lessened. Therefore, depending on the task structure, the reward structure and status-logic of task interactions may shift (Michaels 1977; Bossert 1979).

In all of these different task structures, teachers generally find ways to position themselves in asymmetrical relationships with their students. Teachers retain their power position because they hold a monopoly on forms of diffuse speech (such as performative, declarative, and informative speech) that are directed at the class as a whole. Typically, a teacher will use these forms of speech while standing in front of a class. Moreover, he or she will utilize an impersonal, authoritative tone. Each of these indirect forms of speech calls on students to be quiet and listen. Any student response would seem awkward and improper (McLaren 1986: Chapter 3). Teachers also have a monopoly on evaluative forms of speech. That is, teachers correct, encourage, praise, sanction, blame, and challenge students far more than students do so in return (Dreeben [1968] 2002; Jackson 1968; Bidwell and Friedkin 1988). Hence teachers may or may not be central to the instructional format of tasks, but they will often retain their monopoly on indirect and evaluative forms of public speech.

Student labor and its evaluation create asymmetric relationships between teachers and students (Hurn 1985). In addition, labor output and its evaluation affect the relationships that adolescents (i.e., persons) have with one another as students (i.e., roles). Students produce work that is evaluated by teachers, creating a unidirectional workflow. Teachers evaluate the quantity and quality of student work and then rank pupils when allocating grades. Students typically value these grades and compete for higher rankings. However, one student’s success comes at another’s loss because the rankings often shift in a zero-sum manner (Coleman 1961; Michaels 1977). A good example of this is class rankings within grade-cohorts: when the number two student moves up a notch, the number one student moves down.

In sum, organizational anchors reveal several logics or organizing principles that characterize the academic frame: academic topics, incorporative versus developmental activity structures (Metz 1978; Cumins 1989), asymmetry in teacher-talk and workflow (McLaren 1986), and competition among students for status-rankings (Coleman 1961). Of course these logics will vary by classroom, but all share a family resemblance making teacher-student roles recognizable and expected in every classroom setting—a master-frame for all task situations.

**Sociable Situations and Sociable Frames**

Even the studies of classrooms that describe uniformly engaged audiences note that not all class time is spent completing work and engaging in tasks. A class period may consist of several lessons, each with different segments.
Before each class begins, between segments, and after the lesson is completed, there are moments of transition or breaks in the instructional process when the teacher does not prescribe patterns of interaction (Stodolsky 1988). Here, outside the task frame, youth are left to define the situation for themselves. In undefined segments of class time, public social discourse rises in prominence and becomes the primary current of activity. Other subordinate tracks are then interpreted from a sociable frame and serve to retain adolescent involvement in social affairs. Adolescents will take advantage of free time by turning to their friends and gossiping about the weekend. In the process different cliques will be formed and maintained. In such instances, the main story line becomes one of overt gossiping supported by secondary tracks of clarification, side gossip, and elaboration. All secondary tracks support and reinforce the continuation of the main story line of overt gossip.

Meanings in the sociable frame have an organizational logic distinct from the academic frame because they are anchored by sociable topics and activities, as well as by friendships and more playful interactions. When in the sociable frame, youth communicate about certain topics that have little to do with most academic subjects such as dating, parties, sports, television, movies, music, sex, drinking, personal relations, upcoming events, and so forth (Sieber 1979; Mehan 1980; Edelsky 1981; Streeck 1984; James and Drakich 1993; Alton-Lee, Nuthall, and Patrick. 1993; Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson 1995). Youth have a wide range of social experiences to which they look forward and on which they reflect. This shared set of social experiences generally has referents outside of class, but they are so important that students repeatedly draw on such folkways whenever possible in class (Coleman 1961; McLaren 1986; Fine 1987; Eder 1995).

The sociable frame is also characterized by the formal properties of adolescents’ social activities and patterns of interaction (Corsaro and Eder 1990). Sociable activities arise as forms of gossip, collaborative storytelling, sharing, ritual teasing, and play to name but a few (Goodwin 1980; Maynard 1985; Eder 1986; Corsaro and Rizzo 1988; Eder and Enke 1991; Eder 1995). These talk-activities almost always involve egalitarian turn taking and collaboration between participants. Hence, social discourse is more evenly distributed and group oriented than task discourse (Metz 1978; Doyle 1986). In addition, sociable talk is fast paced and tends to overlap the discourse of separate speakers, further lessening interpersonal distinctions. Sociable talk arises in the classroom between friends and it develops enclaves of supportive relationships that protect the individual from ridicule when taking the public stage. As a result, an interaction order emerges in the classroom where collaborative efforts are spent preserving interactions that enable ritual selves to be safely performed (Goffman 1983; Rawls 1987; Giordano 1995).

Friendship networks not only reinforce this interaction order; they are also the basis of informal status distinctions between adolescents in the class. The friendship network consists of preexistent, keyed, and emergent types of friends (Goffman [1974] 1986; McFarland 1999). Preexistent friendship rela-
tions are those that persist outside of class and predate membership in the course, such as hangout friends. Keyed ties are friendships that form in class on the basis of some other shared affiliation (Simmel 1971). In previous research, for example, I observed class friendships that formed on the basis of shared participation in athletics, theater, or merely race and gender (McFarland 1999). It is not uncommon to see groups of thespians or African American females who view one another as class friends, but who do not get together on weekends. Emergent friendships have neither a keyed nor a pre-existent basis. They emerge in the setting through collaborative participation in sociable activities or simply by way of frequent interaction (Festinger, Schachter, and Back [1950] 1967). As a whole, then, classroom friendship networks entail affective ties that have a pastiche of social origins (Cusick 1973).

In the classroom informal status is given to those who observe group norms and maintain the processes of interaction. These popular individuals and cliques tend to be “regular guys and gals” who are the least threatening to others in the class (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939; Homans [1950] 1992; Merten 1998). They are adolescents who maintain the interaction order such that ritual presentations of self are safely performed (Goffman 1983; Rawls 1987). This is somewhat counterintuitive since one might expect members of the leading crowd to be the most popular in the classroom (Coleman 1961). Instead, leading crowd members tend to be moderately popular individuals and cliques that are snobbish in their friendship choices. They lack real dominance in many classrooms because sets of students view members of the leading crowd much like a negative reference group (de Waal 1982). In several classrooms I observed athletes and theater students refer to one another with disdain. In such contexts third-party cliques became the most vocal in classroom affairs since they brokered these polarized cliques and enjoyed a degree of esteem (as the least disliked in class: see Kinney 1993; McFarland 1999).

In sum, the academic and sociable frames within many high school classrooms have organizational anchors with distinct form and content. It is often the case that academic and sociable affairs entail very different types of topics, roles, activities, and forms of discourse. Academic affairs in the classroom frequently entail abstract academic topics, teacher-student roles, teacher-centered tasks, more controlled turns at talk, monopolistic use of certain forms of talk, and a status system based on individual competition and rank. In contrast, sociable affairs in the classroom frequently entail topics of a personal or entertaining nature, collaborative activities and egalitarian relationships, overlapping fast-paced turns at talk, and status rewards based on service to the group and conformity to group norms. Consequently, the organizational logic of sociable affairs often exists in juxtaposition to academic work (Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson 1995).

**DOMINANT FRAMES AND SUBORDINATE TRACKS OF ACTIVITY**

Task and sociable situations may consist of contradictory organizational logics but nevertheless persist in the majority of classroom settings. Every class-
room by definition has an academic situation; otherwise it is no longer a classroom, but something altogether different. Many descriptions of classroom situations describe well-behaved, highly engaged classrooms where one observes the class collectively switch between sociable and academic frames of interaction. Such a uniformly focused class is possible, but it is only one of the possible situational outcomes given the multiplicity of interaction loci and interaction frames that are often present in the classroom setting. In addition, uniformly focused settings almost invariably entail subordinate tracks of activity that sustain a general focus on the main storyline and are therefore not truly uniform.

Early work in discourse analysis nicely portrays what uniform, sequential situations look like when they arise in classrooms (Mehan 1979; Cazden 1988). Mehan's (1979) work describes the typical lesson of a classroom as having three parts or phases: an opening, instructional, and closing phase. During the opening and closing minutes of a class period, activity segments of free time, maintenance, or transitions are common and students find that behavioral expectations are rather loosely defined (Stodolsky 1988). During such opening phases, the sociable frame guides interpretations and behavior such that loud, fast-paced, energetic speech acts are common. During these opening moments, one often observes a teacher and students engaging in excited social banter about their weekends and personal lives. After awhile the teacher begins to make announcements and give directives that drown out sociable affairs and draw student attention to academic work. Shortly thereafter public academic talk becomes the primary, dominant track of activity in the classroom. The reverse switch is also observed in the final minutes of class. As tasks are completed and the passing period approaches, students' academic focus wanes as peers again socialize and relate to one another on a more personal basis. Thus we see a switch from the sociable frame's to the academic frame's dominance in the opening phases of most class lessons, and then a switch back to the sociable frame's dominance in the class period's closing minutes (Jackson 1968). In this manner a sequential enactment of activities and roles occurs where adults and adolescents switch routines and identities (akin to changing games and hats) from play routines and egalitarian friendship roles to task routines and asymmetrical relationships of teacher-student roles, and then back again. Unfortunately, in most classroom settings it is the academic frame and tasks that must be actively constructed through a great deal of effort, and it is the sociable frame toward which actors invariably drift when such efforts pause or cease to persist.

During the instructional phase of class periods, public task discourse is generally considered the primary track of activity to which actors attend and adhere (Mehan 1979, 1980). However, few scholars remark on how the main storyline of instruction is often accompanied by multiple subordinate tracks of activity that retain student involvement (Goffman [1974] 1986). For instance, high school teachers often lecture to students, informing them about new facts and skills. Students listen but sometimes miss certain points or find
others difficult to follow. In an effort to keep up, pupils privately turn to
neighbors and ask for clarification or elaboration (Goffman 1981). These
instances of private task discourse are adjustments that students make to stay
involved in the task. At other points in a lecture, students grow bored and pri-
vately turn to neighbors to make a funny face or crack a joke. After the brief
repose, these same students fall back into the lecture somewhat refreshed.
Here private sociable activity is a secondary track that serves as a release valve
and outlet for student sentiments that are publicly discouraged from being
voiced during lectures. Privately sociable students temporarily put the task on
hold but bracket and conceal their playful behavior. In so doing, they subor-
dinate sociable affairs to the main storyline of the academic lesson (see

Hence a primary stream of activity like teacher-led recitation is main-
tained by waves of private talk that enable students to adapt to the rigid behav-
ioral demands of the task. Pupils engage in private secondary tracks of activity
in order to clarify the task or let off steam. In this manner both student and
teacher identities are maintained through the lesson. However, academic work
will not always be the dominant activity in a classroom. In the example above,
private sociable activity is considered a secondary track to instruction because
it sustains student involvement in instruction. But private social discourse can
also be a secondary track to public social discourse in other segments of class
time. For example, in the opening and closing segments of a class period, pri-
te sociable activity has the purpose of sustaining the primary social doing of
gossip, play, or collaborative storytelling. In both situations private discourse
sustains the primary framework, whether it is related to academic work or
sociable affairs. Such a conceptualization enables one to view the classroom as
having multiple interweaving strands of secondary discourse that surround
and reinforce the primary stream of participant activity. Nevertheless, matters
become more complicated when we acknowledge that in some settings there
may be multiple, independent streams of activity and that each has its own
subordinate tracks of private discourse.

MULTIPLE PRIMARY FRAMES

Many classrooms lack a single interpretive framework that dominates all par-
ticipants’ definition of the situation. In these classrooms, there are multiple
loci of interaction that compete for adherents and lack hierarchical or nested
interrelation. A multiplicity of competing situations is a common occurrence
in many small group settings. Loci of academic and sociable interaction can
become distinct primary frameworks of interaction that entail their own story
line, subordinate tracks of activity, and organizational logics. This conceptual-
ization of primary and secondary interpretive frameworks enables us to
decribe classroom contexts where “what is going on” remains unclear or
divided. It also allows us to introduce a political dimension to framing and
classroom situations in which definitional work is contested in certain arenas.
and accepted in others. In many respects this conceptualization improves on
Goffman’s description of primary frames by making sensible situations a prob-
lematic outcome that political agents joust to establish (as he and others

In general, it is the presence of public sociable affairs that creates multi-
ple primary frames in classroom settings. Public sociable affairs tend to arise
in classes where adolescents have many friends or are given ample opportuni-
ty to interact with one another during and between tasks. Such opportunities
arise in student-centered task formats and during long transitions between
academic tasks. When friendship roles and relations enter classrooms or
emerge within them, youth are obliged to show loyalty and liking to their
friends in order to maintain the role relation (Blau [1964] 1996). Moreover,
since friends have shared histories as well as similar interests and back-
grounds, they will have much to talk about that is unrelated to the class task.
Hence by virtue of being friends, there is an inclination to interact on a basis
quite distinct from that called for by academic work. Adolescents also social-
ize when they are given the opportunity to interact, especially during seg-
ments in which they are left to define the situation for themselves (e.g., free
time) or they greater autonomy over their action (e.g., group work). In addi-
tion, like most any person, adolescents wish to interact on a meaningful basis
that enables them to present their social selves (Waller 1932; Mead 1934;
Goffman 1959). When tasks pertain to abstract topics, youth may activate the
sociable frame and reference meanings in their social world outside of class.

Friendship networks and social opportunities interact to have indepen-
dent and compounding effects on the sociability of students in a class. Hence
densely interconnected friendship relations increase sociable behavior, while a
sparse friendship network will be less sociable. When the teacher imposes
centralized instruction, sociable behavior is dampened because students lack
frequent opportunities to interact, but students will be inclined to interact
when teachers open access to discourse (McFarland 2001). Therefore students
are generally inclined to socialize when they have many friends and many
chances to interact. Dense friendship networks and student-centered tasks are
therefore associated with high rates and wide distributions of interactions. In
contrast, teacher-centered formats hinder sociable interaction and narrow the
distribution of interactions as fewer speakers have the opportunity to take the
floor. During teacher-centered formats, sequential public turns are the norm
and deviations are easily observed. Hence the persistence of sociable affairs is
often prevented as teachers administer negative sanctions to these distur-
bances that threaten the successful performance of a centralized task struc-
ture. Consequently, informal relationships and the formal organization of
instruction are two key structural anchors that can constrain and enable the
presence of multiple primary frameworks.

Which conditions explain how academic and sociable frameworks of
interaction interrelate? In some classrooms the coexistence of academic and
sociable situations are compatible and do not create problems, while in others
these situations compete for adherents and undermine the existence of the other (Willis 1977; Sieber 1979; Mehan 1980; Alton-Lee, Nuthall, and Patrick 1993; Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson 1995). Which characteristics of classroom settings determine whether multiple situations exist in aligned or oppositional states? Congruence between academic and sociable affairs generally arises because students have intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to learn and comply with behavioral expectations of tasks. As stated above, the general inclination or drift in student attention is toward play and sociable affairs. In other words, the variance in adolescents' sociable inclinations is less than the variance in their academic interest. Hence it is assumed that when students are interested in the subject matter, care about grades, and want to attend college, they will be more likely to comply with efforts to make academic affairs the primary interpretive framework. Even though they may drift into socializing during various phases of class lessons, the teacher will find it easier to draw such students back on task.

In some classes academic and social situations merge together. By this I mean that meanings of either frame interpenetrate. Such situational mergers occur when students are highly motivated but have tasks organized in student-centered formats such as group work or discussion. Student-centered formats serve to bring classmates into relation with one another rather than with just the teacher. However, by forming work relations between students, the teacher also opens up channels of discourse that may be transformed and imbued with content unrelated to the task (Simmel 1971). That is, interacting students not only talk more about their tasks, they talk more about social affairs. Since teachers often accept a degree of social behavior, a merger of situations is allowed.

Mergers are also facilitated when the content of tasks is relevant to adolescents' social relationships and personal lives. In fieldwork I observed a clear situational merger in a creative writing class. There the teacher conducted lessons where presenters expressed their sentiments and the audience adhered to a norm of giving only positive feedback. In such a context, the teacher deftly merged parts of multiple roles: that of facilitator, boss, confidant, and friend. Similarly, when students orated their papers to classmates they performed across interpretive frameworks and merged organizational logics. Student orators invoked parts of multiple identities in a pastiche manner, playing the parts of student, male or female, peer, and friend.

Unfortunately, successful mergers such as the one described above are difficult to achieve. In many classrooms the merging of academic and sociable frameworks requires a great deal of compromise (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985). As students bring more sociable meanings to bear on tasks, the activity can get out of hand and be transformed into a game relevant to dating relationships and football rather than the lesson that the teacher had in mind. Moreover, mergers can confuse the students about the appropriate rules of conduct. What is going on may be unclear and endless debate can arise when such lack of clarity is present.
Teachers have tipping points at which they feel that the inclusion of sociable affairs begins to disrupt the completion of tasks (Bidwell and Friedkin 1988). At some point teachers utilize framing strategies to "flood out" problematic behaviors (that is, a directed effort to break down or disrupt certain situations) and "flood in" appropriate ones (Goffman [1974] 1986). If students are highly motivated, the teacher has more leverage over students and is more likely to successfully tweak or realign students back on task, primarily through bridging ties and amplifying beliefs and values that participants already hold (Snow et al. 1986).

**WHEN TENSIONS MOUNT: SITUATIONAL MICROPOLITICS**

Oppositional states usually arise between academic and sociable affairs in a classroom when students are not interested in the course subject and have little concern for grades (Dreeben and Barr 1988). This lack of academic resolve is partly a result of background and partly a result of the topic’s lack of relevance to adolescents’ lives (Cumins 1989; Haroutunian-Gordon 1991). In low-resolution settings, youth tend to focus more on sociable affairs and oppose efforts to redirect them on-task. Teachers frequently contain such oppositional tendencies by using teacher-centered task structures and rigid behavioral controls. In such circumstances the social world of adolescents diverges from the academic world but is suppressed or hindered from outward expression. Sociable situations still persist in private and students resent efforts to mobilize them back onto schoolwork.

When unmotivated students enter student-centered tasks, they may take the opportunity to socialize and openly rebel from academic work. In these classrooms tasks are transformed into games or jokes or simply supplanted by sociable affairs (McFarland 1999: Chapter 16; McFarland 2001). Under such circumstances the conflict is in the open and a combative rebellious atmosphere persists despite teachers’ efforts to contain and suppress such behavior. Taking such a conceptualization to its logical outcome, one would hypothesize that classrooms composed of students with low academic resolve, dense friendship networks, and greater sociable opportunities will have the greatest rate and distribution of classroom conflict between students’ sociable frames and teachers’ task frames.

The potentially combative relationship between academic and sociable affairs is best illustrated through the example (taken from previous research) of an actual classroom and the multiple tracks of activity that take place during a single class period (see McFarland 1999). My observation of one particular class period in an Algebra 2 class demonstrates how sociable and task situations can coexist in a combative manner. It illustrates how students and teacher adapt to one another’s behavior, and how social and academic situations persist in spite of each party’s attempt to rid the classroom of the other interaction framework. In describing this class period, I will not relate all of the discourse that transpires nor the full retinue of data collected on the set-
ting because my interest here is merely conceptual illustration. Note that while I use names throughout the account for ease of reference, they are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the subjects.

Algebra 2 class has all the organizational conditions discussed above that could lead it to become a combative environment. It is composed of students who are neither very interested in math nor very concerned about grades. The students are well connected as friends and the class is taught in primarily student-centered formats. The teacher, Mr. Ellis, is a middle-aged African American male with a degree in mathematics and progressive teaching goals. On the class day in question, students enter the class and sit in their separate friendship cliques at three different locations within the room. Because students were able to choose their own seats, their work groups aligned nearly perfectly with their friendship selections. At the front is a clique of five African American females in their sophomore year of high school. At the back of the room is a clique of five white sophomores, two of whom are females and three of whom are males. These students are the most motivated and attentive but only mildly more so than their classmates. On the right side of the room is a third clique of two junior African American males and two white females, one of whom is a sophomore and the other of whom is a junior. Both the mixed-race and African American student cliques have little or no interest in algebra, but they share a keen interest in their friends.

As students sit in their groups, they excitedly banter about their weekends, parties, boys, girls, and the like, while a few hurriedly copy the homework assignment due at the beginning of the class. As the bell rings, the teacher takes roll quietly at his desk and exchanges a few sociable remarks with the black females at the front of the room. After a few minutes, he rises and begins to lecture, demonstrating how to do various math problems from an overhead projector. A few of the white students listen, but most of the other students continue to socialize. The white students at the back of the class are relatively quiet, but they privately socialize and copy homework problems from their neighbor as they intermittently listen to what the teacher says. Every now and then, an African American male student in the mixed-race clique will complain, “I don’t understand what you’re saying,” or the less serious, “Why don’t we ever do field trips like other classes?” Soon the volatility of social discourse is so high that the teacher struggles to hear his voice over his students. At this point the teacher turns to the most vocal clique, the African American females, and makes a few reprimanding remarks. “Clarisse, why did you bring your biology book in here, and why aren’t you listening!?” Clarisse replies with a joke to which all her friends respond with laughter, “Ahh, Mr. Ellis I don’t listen in there either!” After chastising another member of the clique, Mr. Ellis turns back to the overhead, but few listen and the socializing gets even louder. Mr. Ellis begins to make even more dramatic efforts to acquire control by openly shouting at students, “Sit down!,” “Get your calculator out!,” and “I am not going to keep this up!”

About fifteen minutes into the class, the teacher is pacing back and forth
at the front of the room and shouting at the top of his lungs, "CAN I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION??!! CAN I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION??!!?" It finally gets quieter as students in the mixed-race clique laugh back in low voices that mimic his, "YYESSS!!" The classroom is somewhat quieter now and Mr. Ellis asks, "Who did the homework?" Students reply with jokes of their own. One boy from the mixed-race clique shouts, "I was absent!" to which a couple of his friends shout, "Dude, you never do it!" and the teacher laughs in disbelief. Another winks at his friends saying, "I was in real bad shape Friday and got busy this weekend!" (implying he was hung over and partying). Others throw forth their humorous excuses and the teacher once more explodes, "IF YOU ARE NOT LISTENING, SHUT YOUR MOUTH!!" The class grows somewhat quiet again and Mr. Ellis starts to walk around the room with his grade book, noting which students did their homework. As he passes each desk, he tells the student how awful his or her grade currently is. Meanwhile the students go back to socializing and even start announcing their grades to the rest of the class. It becomes a game to see who has the lowest score, and one of the African American males at the side of the room believes he has won, so he stands with his fists triumphantly raised in the air as his classmates laugh and cheer him on. After recording students’ completed homework, the teacher publicly chastises the class for its grades and then proceeds to do more problems at the overhead.

The white student clique reacts to the teacher's anger by quieting and paying more attention. The students in the African American and mixed-race cliques react by temporarily relegating their sociable activity to private backstage arenas. This only serves to further distance the sociable situations of the problematic students from the teacher. Hence while the students adjust to the teacher's demands, only the white clique is persuaded to make academic work its primary focus. In contrast, the mixed-race and African American cliques adjust to the teacher's demands but keep the social frame as their primary focus. Their private sociable activity persists as a separate story line that adjusts to its environment. About halfway through the class period, the teacher stops lecturing at the overhead and assigns homework to be started during class. As Mr. Ellis sits down, the students openly socialize once more so that the sociable frame jumps back into public view, where it persists for the rest of the class period. The white clique males and the mixed-race clique males interact more frequently during this phase of the lesson, and this draws the white clique back into sociable affairs.

In sum, the majority of students in Algebra 2 this day only attend to task-related talk as a secondary track of activity. This is especially true for the African American female clique and the mixed-race clique since they make little effort to even conceal their disdain for class tasks. Even when sociable affairs become private, they remain the primary focus for the students who merely tolerate the teacher's lecturing in the background. An occasional joke or complaint voiced at or by the teacher becomes fuel for further sociable conversations among students in their groups. Apart from the white clique, the
Algebra 2 students never really leave their friendship relations and sociable frame behind. The teacher, on the other hand, remains an agent of the academic frame. He succeeds in persuading the white clique to switch its situational focus, but only intermittently. In short, the teacher tries to sustain participation and focus on academic affairs, while the African American female and mixed-race cliques sustain their own sociable situations and interpretive frameworks in juxtaposition to his efforts; and off to the side, a less vocal clique of white students enters and exits the variety of academic and sociable situations throughout the class period.

The example of Algebra 2 class illustrates how two types of primary frameworks can exist in contention and compete with one another for adherents. Throughout the class period, sociable affairs had greater sway over the majority of students. The academic routines led by the teacher only acquired the intermittent commitment of the white student clique during a lecture, and only then because it was amplified by the teacher's negative sanctions and threats. In order to perform a successful lecture, the teacher needed students to make the academic routines and interpretive modes the focus of their attention. However, the relevance of the lecture and its academic rules were undermined by the presence of personal friends and the fact that the students were disinterested in the content of the lesson. When the teacher changed the activity to one of seatwork, students openly disregarded their work and socialized loudly with one another, thereby establishing the sociable frame's uniform dominance in the setting.

**DOMINANT INDIVIDUALS, CLIQUES, AND COALITIONS**

In many classrooms subsets of students take the lead in play and work situations (Metz 1978; Cohen and Lotan 1997). As such, actor involvement in the construction and elaboration of interaction frames is uneven. Certain cliques and individuals dominate discourse and therefore have greater influence on the definition of classroom situations. These dominant individuals are typically popular among classmates and above-average students (McFarland 2001). If they are not members of the formally dominant clique, then they are at least members of a tightly bound clique (high closure). Students with social support more successfully perform on public terrain than those who are isolates and social pariahs. Student and teacher audiences are highly judgmental and socially reinforced students are the most resilient actors in these moments of sanction and ridicule (Giordano 1995; Merten 1998; McFarland 1999).

Dominant individuals and cliques greatly influence the definition of classroom situations (Cohen and Lotan 1997). As resilient actors they manipulate frameworks in an effort to obtain greater control over interaction. How academic and sociable situations coexist depends in part on how dominant actors form political regimes within classrooms. Regimes can form in classes between a clique and a teacher or among cliques of students. In the former case, we find an allied regime that reigns with the teacher and tasks, while in
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the latter case we find a warring regime that combats the teacher and tasks. These regimes and alliances lead certain sets of individuals to dominate both academic and sociable affairs, thereby acting as junctures across the multiple primary frames, and the coexistence of multiple situations is allowed as long as the regime or alliance retains its dominance.

In general, dominant students will act in the direction of their social support since they risk losing their status within the group when they behave in ways that counter their audience's proclivities or norms (Sherif 1948; Homans [1950] 1992; de Waals 1982; Fine 1987). Hence in classes with motivated students, the dominant cliques and individuals tend to form alliances with teachers. Such a political coalition between student cliques and the teacher is allowed by the teacher because dominant students facilitate instructional processes by participating in tasks (see Diani [1996] on inclusion). Moreover, this regime is often seen as desirable by the teacher because co-optation of the dominant clique removes resources from the sociable frame, lessening competition with academic endeavors for student adherents. However, this alliance frequently has a price since even the most motivated dominant students will make social digressions, jokes, and occasionally challenge the teacher despite their heightened leadership and involvement in tasks. Hence teacher alliances with dominant students draw in social elements to tasks, but afford such performance privileges only to the more vocal students (Gordon 1957).

Some teachers prefer to ally with the most successful students rather than the most interactive or dominant students (Cusick 1973). This strategy has a mixed effect on the classroom. The teacher bridges to engaged students in an effort to keep the instructional process moving at a good pace and retain control that dominant students sometimes abuse. However, by doing this, the teacher can polarize the social structure of adolescents into specialized cliques. The students aligned with the teacher become active in tasks and the previously dominant students begin to specialize in sociable affairs. This can lead to two separate classroom situations that persist at opposite ends of the room and in contention with one another.

In classrooms where the students are unmotivated, the dominant clique or coalition of students can become a warring regime against the teacher and tasks in an effort to acquire concessions and privileges. Warring regimes adopt certain behavioral tactics or framing strategies in an effort to acquire control of the classroom situation. As described in the case of Algebra 2, the teacher used negative sanctions and indirect forms of speech to breach sociable affairs and flood students out of the public stage. Such a strategy sought to deconstruct the competing frame of interaction not only by making adherence to it more costly through negative sanctions (such as warnings) but by constraining participation, thereby preventing such endeavors from continuing (through loss of resources and commitment).

Dominant individuals and cliques in Algebra 2 used similar strategies to combat academic interpretations of events. Students used complaints and
challenges to breach academic affairs. Such complaining and public confessions of confusion serve to slow down the task, draw attention to problems endemic to the endeavor, and basically demobilize student involvement in tasks (Hansen 1989). Students also used jokes to distance the evaluations that the academic frame placed on them through low grades and negative teacher sanctions. Constant joking and ridicule of academic affairs served to devalue its identity-attributions and make sociable activities of play and gossip appear to be more meaningful and rewarding streams of activity in which to participate (McLaren 1986; Woods 1983).

Therefore dominant individuals (teachers or students), cliques, and coalitions use various interaction strategies to deconstruct the competing frame and amplify their own. They do so to redirect audiences and establish a dominant interpretive framework in the classroom. Powerful individuals and cliques find that their efforts to establish a dominant mode of interaction are facilitated by forming coalitions or alliances with others. For instance, in the example of the Algebra 2 class, the friendship structure consisted of three cliques (the African American female clique, the white clique, and the mixed-race clique). During the first semester, these cliques were somewhat loosely interconnected, with the mixed-race clique acting as a unifying bridge between the clique of African American females and the clique of white students. In fact, the African American females and the mixed-race clique of students even mobilized as a coalition against the teacher in many disputes, becoming the locus of conflict in the class. The African American female clique in particular liked to aggravate and disrupt the teacher, and the mixed-race clique reinforced such efforts. Since the class was generally unmotivated, the rebellious coalition even acquired the occasional social support from the clique of white students, making it nearly an uprising at times. Throughout the year the coalition of rebellious students successfully subordinated task interpretations to those of the sociable framework, transforming the classroom situation (see Diani [1996] and Snow et al. [1986] on realignment).

However, political alignments and alliances are seldom static. In today’s schools student populations change as pupils move in and out of the classroom and school during the year and even semester. As such, political alliances that establish routines of interaction can readily change the definition of the classroom situation. The greatest change in political alignments arises when a teacher or student leaves the class. Teachers seldom leave classrooms in mid-semester, but in certain instances (e.g., pregnancy, dismissal, or voluntary leave) a teacher will exit the setting, leaving a long-term substitute or new teacher to enter. Even when a teacher falls ill for a day and a substitute shows, there is a noticeable change in student behavior. Hence merely removing or replacing one particularly dominant individual can have drastic effects on political alignments.

When students leave a class, the changes to the classroom friendship network can be more subtle. In my observation the greatest changes in high school classroom networks occur at the start of a new semester. In many year-
long classes, a few students alter their course schedule in mid-year, thus leaving a class and entering another class as a new student. The loss or addition of certain individuals creates a shift in the entire social structure, leading certain cliques and coalitions of students to fall apart and others to rise. This in turn alters which individual or clique has more social support and ability to influence public discourse.

Such a shift actually occurred in the example of Algebra 2 class. There the coalition of rebellious students imploded in the second semester when a new African American female, Anice, was introduced to the class and decided to sit with the mixed-race clique. The clique of African American females had previously included all of the African American females in the class. They interpreted Anice's group selection as an act of snobbery and began to insult and gossip about her. This offended the mixed-race clique, who then hardened their clique boundary and dissolved their alliance with the African American female group. Toward the end of the year, the clique of African American females began to socialize more with the teacher, while the mixed-race group socialized with the third clique of white students. As a result of these new political alignments, the classroom situation was slightly reframed. Sociable affairs remained dominant, but they now took place in distinct locales of the class. The African American females took on a playful, flirtatious, but no less disrespectful tone with the teacher; the mixed-race group became more recalcitrant and challenging; and the white students became class clowns (see McFarland 1999; McFarland 2001: Chapter 16).

Not all shifts in the classroom situation have structural leads. Actors can manipulate or tweak frames in an effort to alter student participation. An adept actor can manipulate frames to his or her advantage. Individuals are more successful at such manipulations in situations where they deftly use framing tactics aimed at select individuals with the greatest social clout in the setting (Goffman [1967] 1982). Framing strategies that affect dominant students have the greatest impact on the classroom situation as a whole. However, actors can also succeed without changing the classroom situation. They can simply maneuver through risky social situations without attracting any negative evaluations from either interpretive frame.

CONCLUSION

This article characterizes classrooms as small group settings wherein multiple streams of activity occur and are interpreted from at least two frameworks of interaction: academic and sociable doings. These situations often arise simultaneously in a classroom and compete for student adherents. The extent to which multiple situations and frameworks of interpretation oppose or align with one another depends on the organizational characteristics of each situation or set of affairs. This work argues that a wedge is placed between task and sociable doings when academic work is not aligned with students' lived experiences and interests, or when students see little value in the content of the
curriculum (Dreeben [1968] 2002; Bidwell and Friedkin 1988; Haroutunian-Gordon 1991). Such disillusionment leads adolescents to gravitate away from academic work to sociable affairs and to define the latter in opposition to tasks (Fine 1987; Ogbu 1987). Teachers can contain sociable affairs through teacher-centered routines but the resistance to academic work will remain latent and subversive. When tasks are student centered, latent resistance can manifest in open revolt. Moreover, when dense networks of friends are present in a disillusioned class, they may compete with the teacher’s control even in transmittal formats. Nonetheless, the opposite also tends to be true: open instruction for interested, engaged students enables the diffusion and reinforcement of positive academic values and authentic dialogue (Nystrand 1997). Hence the relevance of materials as well as the formal and informal organization of relationships within the classroom greatly defines the manner in which academic and social worlds relate to one another (McFarland 2001). With multiple loci of interaction in classrooms, it becomes evident that teachers are not the only audience to whom students adjust when performing in class. Students outnumber the teacher and the pastiche of interpersonal friendships and alliances can reflect several dominant audience foci. Apart from the teacher, popular students have been found to alter classmate perceptions and behaviors (Cohen and Lotan 1997) and friendship cliques of well-connected pupils (Cusick 1973; Bossert 1979; Plank 2000). What has not been fully explored is how and when dominant individuals and groups, whether teachers or students, sway classrooms to adopt one interaction framework rather than another.

Dominant actors and cliques are the political agents of classrooms, and they constantly lay claim to definitions of the classroom situation by promoting particular interpretations and doings. The teacher is invariably an agent of academic affairs and may constantly try to focus students’ attention on work and mobilize them to complete prescribed tasks (Jackson 1968; Hammersley 1974, 1976; Snow et al. 1986). Students, on the other hand, can be agents of alternative interpretations of academic affairs and even agents of more playful sociable doings that have nothing to do with prescribed tasks (McFarland 1999). Students frequently comply with the teacher’s demands, but such compliance often entails some adaptation of rules and procedures and the outcome of tasks diverges slightly from the script’s expected outcome (Hansen 1989). Divergence is even more pronounced when students collude on the sidelines to develop and present counterclaims to the teacher’s definition of the classroom situation (Alton-Lee, Nuthall, and Patrick 1993).

Combative political maneuvers are more complex. Resistant pupils adopt behaviors that on the one hand demobilize their peers’ adherence to academic work, and on the other draw favorable attention to other collective endeavors and interpretive modes that educators generally find incompatible with the goals of schooling (McLaren 1986; McFarland 1999). Combative teachers adopt similar behaviors in return and breach adolescents’ side conversations and sociable affairs and then redirect student attention by redeveloping inter-
est in academic work (McFarland 1999). As such, the classroom setting is one where commitment to a single endeavor and interpretation is seldom fully won but must be constantly worked out and negotiated (Dreeben [1968] 2002; Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985; McNeil 1986).

But interaction strategies are not all that dominant actors need to perform in order to establish their definition of the classroom situation. Also relevant in this world are coalitions or alliances. Since multiple audience foci and situational loyalties can exist in classrooms, teachers frequently reach out and ally with more dominant sets of students by incorporating their interests or giving them privileges of discourse. Such alliances help the teacher focus attention on tasks and mobilize participation toward completing them. In this manner teachers co-opt other loci of activity removing resources (that is, participants) from competing collective endeavors. However, student groups can also ally and present the teacher with a large unified coalition. Due to their numbers and propensity to act collectively, coalitions of student cliques can draw enough participation away from tasks that academic work never gets done. In other words, student coalitions are capable of commencing and fulfilling classroom rebellions.

This conceptualization views classrooms as small group settings composed of multiple simultaneous frameworks with mechanisms that wedge interpretive frameworks apart, resulting in divergent moral obligations that these misaligned frameworks of interaction can impose on students. Much of social experience is complex and ambiguous (Merton 1976) and a number of contradictory interpretations can be made of the same action. By making the multiplicity of situations a starting point for classroom conceptualizations, we see the logic of behaviors that frequently occur within classrooms. Moreover, we see the natural state of high school classrooms as one where tensions can easily mount. Classrooms are settings wherein order and task behavior are never established as permanent features, but are perpetual questions that teachers and students politically confront and negotiate in the everyday life of school.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the Institute for Educational Initiatives at the University of Notre Dame. I would like to extend special thanks to Warren Kubitschek for his thoughtful comments that helped give shape to this chapter. I am also greatly indebted to Robert Dreeben, Charles Bidwell, John Padgett, and the late Roger Gould for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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