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Asking questions in the operating room : Constrained opportunities for learning during surgical procedures

Many professional settings are organized in such a way that trainees participate to ongoing tasks and procedures, being associated to the work *in fieri* and having the occasion to ask questions in the course of the activity, as the latter unfolds moment by moment.

Within the framework of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, as well as workplace studies, this talk focuses on this kind of context in a surgical department of a university hospital, in which advanced trainees watch an operation in real time and have the opportunity to ask questions to the operating surgeon. Although the trainees are at distance – following the operation in an amphitheater thanks to a CCTV device recording live the procedure occurring in a separate room of the hospital – they participate to the operation moment by moment by being able to discuss live with the surgeon. These operations concern actual patients with actual pathologies but, being broadcasted to an overseeing audience, they are also commented live by the surgeon, who thereby both engages in doing the operation with his team and demonstrating the anatomy and commenting on the procedure for the audience.

On the basis of a rich corpus of videotaped surgical operations, the talk is interested in when it is relevant to ask questions. The sequential position of inserted Question/Answer sequences within the course of the surgery is practically identified both by the operating surgeon and by the members of the audience. The surgeon might offer a space where questions can be asked. A trainee might initiate a Q/A sequence at some point. The moments at which these switches from the operation to a teaching/learning exchange take place are analytically interesting, because they reveal how participants orient to the insertion of a learning opportunity as being possible, relevant, adequate, and safe within a particular moment in the operation or a transition within the procedure. By initiating a question at a particular point of the operation, the trainee can display a form of professional competence and professional vision. Reversely, the ‘misplacement’ of a question - as revealed by several summons addressed and not responded to by the surgeon, by delayed responses, by postpositions of the sequence and even by refusals to answer – displays that the moment is inadequate and even risky and exhibits possible *incompetences* (both at the surgical and at the interactional level).

In this sense, the creation of opportunities to learn is related to the very possibility of competently engaging in different forms of multiactivity – in which several types of actions can be achieved at the same time. This tells us something about the constraints governing the emergence of learnables in the course of an activity, as well as about the organization of work in recognizable and significant moments.