Positionality, Power and Presence as Methodological Praxis

in Transnational Educational Collaboration

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Abstract

The global influence of a sociology of measurement model on educational research, it could be argued, has increasingly narrowed possibilities for methodological discussion and diversity. The rigorous rising of method and attendant ideologies in educational research habitually rewards normative methodological processes, researcher identities and positionalities. Feminist, postcolonial and queer theories have all played a role in decolonizing an understanding of how method/ology is experienced vis-a-vis the ontological-ethical epistemological trialectic. In this chapter, we, a white cisgendered Anglo/Australian Queer/Gay identified and a Thai cisgendered Lesbian academic aim to explore the relationship between cultural difference, embodied identities and the construction of subjectivity in transnational research contexts. We draw on a seven-year partnership between a Thai and Australian University that situated Australian pre-service education students in Thai primary schools with the aim of developing cultural awareness, and culturally safe and responsive teaching practices. Drawing on the principles of community-based participatory research, this chapter critically explores and questions how positionality, power and relationships are experienced and re-negotiated in transnational educational collaborations. We argue the importance for "coming-out" about how our interactions as co-participants and researchers were shaped by discursive practices as critical scholars. We draw on our ideologically and culturally situated narrative reflections across the seven-year partnership to explore how being with/ in and beside were central to re-negotiating and resisting normative expressions of positionality, power, and subjectivity.

Keywords: Decolonisation, transnational collaboration, reflexive narrative, cultural safety

Introduction

This chapter positions "research" not as a static "object or process" but as a dynamic ecology that carries with it a multi-faceted set of coded meanings requiring constant review and reconsideration. In this chapter, we reflect on how our experiences and encounters of differences, with identity and of affiliation, across the seven years of the partnership, inculcated a shift away from dominant research paradigms and toward culturally safe work/ research practices (Williams, 2019). Over the seven years, as our friendship increased, cultural barriers and boundaries became erased and we engaged in mutual narrative reflections. These encompassed what could best be described as capturing the chaos of our strongest feelings as Queer scholars working in the academy in the field of education in Thailand and Australia. As critical researchers, we are invested in drawing upon our "values, passions, preoccupations" and consciously bringing into our academic work our identities as gay and lesbian academics. We acknowledge how a different kind of research practice emerges from the lived experience of queer complexities, nuances and that can become articulated in the tensions of power and positionality when making meaning in a transnational CPI context. Doing transnational CPI in predominantly heteronormative spaces and with dominantly heterosexual Australian pre-service teacher education students and Thai colleagues, we felt we had to be extra vigilant of not allowing our sexuality to get in the way. In previous work, we have both been involved with and have drawn on projects that were grounded in the politics of Queer decolonisation (Vicars, 2022 forthcoming) which we believe offer the potential for the creation of rich discursive spaces of world and self-making (Vicars, 2019).

Framed by shared values, attitudes and methodological congruence, we aligned the development of the project with improving the teaching and learning of English in low socio-

economic status Thai primary schools. The project, as such, was not a distant academic exercise but an "activity that had something at stake and that occurred in a set of situated social conditions" (Smith, 2001, p. 5). Mark had lived in Thailand for several years and was professionally interested in the development of the teaching and learning of English in Thai schools and in meeting the needs of Australian pre-service education students to experience first-hand another culture in an immersive culturally safe way. His interest was in how to disrupt experiences of ongoing institutional racism, especially in the education system [in Australia and to address] and the lack of appropriate [Australian]tertiary education opportunities.

Nuntiya had studied her PhD in the UK and her understanding of ethnorelativism had us engaged in a constant cultural learning and adjusting of our own worldview of each other's cultural negotiation and performance of subjectivity and identity. As our transnational project emerged and developed year by year, it involved us and our students in a series of dynamic social interactions that drew upon situated social practices shaped by local contexts, people and cultural identities. It has been argued "Research practice cannot be disembodied. It is impossible to take the researcher out of any type of research or of any stage of the research process" (Sikes & Goodson, 2003, p. 34), and our liminal cultural insider-ness/outsider-ness had a substantive impact on the knowledge producing process of the project (Doungphummes & Vicars, 2020) which Herda (1999, p. 2) refers to as "intersubjective spaces of understanding".

. Whilst the project did not fall into the category of a research project in an orthodox sense (i.e., methodologies were designed and data was collected systematically) the seven-year continuity of our working together became a field site from which we, as academics have shared and reflected on what we have learned.

Walking into the Unknown: The Transnational Context

Engagement with Asia is a theme that the Australian government, has in recent years focused attention on, and in 2014 the *New Colombo Plan* program was introduced by the Australian Government to promote cultural and educational exchange student programs between Australia and the Indo-Pacific region intended to be transformational by deepening Australia's relationships in the region. The project was initiated by inviting Australian Pre-service Bachelor of Education Students to apply to participate in a two-week study tour. The invitations were distributed via institutional student emails and once the participants had been selected on the basis of academic performance, pre-departure briefings were held weekly. These focused on the importance of creating personal and pedagogical relationships with Thai mentor teachers, Thai students and with Thai culture.

The study tour was intended to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn and reflect on their emergent understanding of an Asia engaged experience of the host country's language, culture and society. This was to be combined with experiential learning through dealing with "real-life" intercultural teaching and learning experiences.

While the pre-existing relationship between Nuntiya and Mark was responsible for the collaborative project being established, we both agreed for the new project the schools selection criterion should be informed by selecting schools from "less privileged" districts indicated by the demographic of low socio-economic students and of each individual schools range of English learning resources.

It was Nuntiya who first approached the selected schools to "sell" the project idea. This proved to be the first encounter with power relations and academic positionality at play. Nuntiya positioned as the researcher representing both the Thai and Australian university had to use her

status afforded by her academic identity as a pass to enter the school and to ask for an unscheduled meeting with the director of each school. Nuntiya was cautious not to overuse her status to the extent that the school directors and teaching staff felt disrespected or compelled to take part in the project (as a host school for the teaching practicum of Australian pre-service teacher students). Negotiating her status and positionality with the correct use of language and attitude proved to be very crucial in securing a positive response from all schools and after consultation with their English language teaching staff, they willingly agreed to be involved in the collaboration.

The importance of agreement as strategy for negotiation is illustrated in the following example of what can happen when it goes wrong. The incident concerned the recruiting of a new school in the 7th year of the project. At first, Nunitya decided to ask her assistant, who was a master degree's student and who had for six years coordinated with all previous participating schools to introduce the project to the new school's director on her behalf. The assistant came back rather perplexed saying that the director paid less attention to the project information than her academic and social credentials and that she was unsure whether the school would be interested in the collaboration. Assuming that this had to do with the hierarchical power relation, which is common in the Thai education context, Nuntiya paid a visit to the director the following day and the meeting went smoothly with him changing his decision for the school to be part of the project. While this may seem subtle, it suggests that one cannot overlook the power politics brought to this encounter by the so-called cultural hierarchy which can be translated to understanding how different positions and positionalities frame communicative protocols. In this case it was most important, to managing the doxa of cultural power relations that positioned the university as the "giver" and the school as the "recipient" - a generally perception in the Thai

academic community. Instead, in order to move the project forward, the school had to be seen as being an equal and mutual collaborator.

Negotiating the gatekeeper process was a crucial step as it was the schools' reception of, and perception toward the project that ensured its viability. First impressions usually create a long-lasting imprint in Thai minds and shape the direction of an "us" and "them" a relationship Hofstede Insight. (n.d.).. Notably in Thai education context, university academics are often highly regarded highly and Dr. Mark as the British/Australian scholar tended to receive an even higher recognition by being a native English speaker. Embedded in such a perception revealed the unequal and uncontested power relation between the higher and basic education institution, and the discourse of Occidentalism, common in Thai society (Comprendio & Savski, 2020). Our project therefore could be considered to be informed by a significant ontolological (re)turn in social theory and we hold the contention that in our attempt to create a sense of partnership with the schools the employment of ontology, epistemology and ethics were inseparable, captured in Barad's (2007, p. 409) neologism, "ethico-onto-epistemology".

Being consciously aware to build a partnership based on a culturally appropriate, sensitive and safe approach required shared interest, equality, a combination of polite and humble gesture with an explicit expression of request for no special treatment. The majority of the school meetings went smoothly, however, the last school on the research team's visiting list became upset due to their interpretation that they had been ranked at the bottom of a hierarchy of schools and they perceived that they were not being considered a priority because of the size of their school. It had to be explained by Nuntiya to the school director that the visiting schedule had been set according to school location and the best effective time management in meeting the head teacher and English teachers. This had unknowingly to us reinforced the school's feeling of

inferiority in relation to the other neighbouring schools and it became apparently clear how the

schedule had become instrumental for the reinforcement of existing positioning and positionality

afforded by and associated with institutional and social status in the local community,

Positionality Shift

Once the gatekeeping process has been negotiated, Nuntiya and Mark began to start the

process to build a trusting relationship with the management teams and with the Thai English

teachers in each school. There was a lot of organization involved that included placing the

Australian students in each school and grade, instructing them to follow the school rules and

criteria, and how to work respectfully with their Thai teachers. We requested that each school

arranged the teaching time slot and classes for the pre-service students' teaching as they saw fit.

It was explained by Nuntiya that the Australian students and Mark were also prepared to

contribute in other school activities and communities in order to express respect and participate

in the working culture of the school and visibly demonstrate a serious intention of working in

partnership, mutual collaboration and reciprocity.

This emphasized collaborative approach resulted in the schools' positive perception

toward the Australian students and the project in general. The schools worked hard to treat the

students with intercultural understanding and hospitality. Each school provided the Australian

students teaching experiences not only in the classroom but through activities such as English

day camps and Wai Kru (Teacher Respect and Gratitude Day). The Thai English teachers also

befriended the students inviting them to have breakfast and lunch at the school and one Thai

teacher adopted a mother-like role to oversee their well-being in the school environment. These

aspects were valued by the Australian students as one described it in his reflective journal:

The most valuable experience from this Thailand study tour would be the rich culture and respect that Thai people have for each other. The whole experience has been quite humbling and the self-reflection/personal growth has been invaluable. Connecting with the school faculty and other teachers has led to lifelong friendships/relationships. We have connected on Facebook and Messenger to continue with collaboration and networking as professional colleagues for future learning and resources. It has been an invaluable experience both personally and professionally…I was lucky enough to experience authentic immersion in the everyday lives of my Thai students as well as cultural events including Wai Khru (Teacher Respect Day) and Cooperation Day. I was welcomed with open arms and will never forget the kindness, respect and generosity shown by the whole school community to myself and my peers.

As mutual trust toward each other increased, it progressively became much easier to work with and in the schools and their eagerness to continue being part of this project was evident despite some of the schools' management team having changed. A deputy director of one participating school who was later promoted to be a director of another school requested the collaboration be maintained with her new school. The initial hierarchical protocols and unequal power relations experienced diminished as the project progressed and the Thai teachers became more open to share their views about the Australian students teaching practice planning, activities, and also raise and voice any issues of concern. The Thai teachers also felt more at ease interacting with Nuntiya and Mark and even asked them to join in their extra-curriculum activities. Those Thai teachers whose English was at a higher level of communicability tended to interact more with Mark and as such Mark gradually shifted from being positioned as out-group to being included as an in-group member.

Limited Participation of Thai Teachers

The shift was not unusual considering the collectivistic nature of Thai people who value a long-term commitment and strong relationship. However, the "in-group" position did not always include the Thai (English language) teachers' participation, especially when working with the Australian students as mentors to upskill their teaching approach. Their involvement in the teaching process was very limited, only occasionally would they assist with classroom management and this we reflected may have had to do with the Thai teachers being responsible for upholding appropriate Thai cultural values and behaviour, i.e., getting involved while someone else was teaching, was considered inappropriate and disrespectful. Another factor contributing to their fear of involvement was the Thai cultural perception of "losing face" or feeling embarrassment for not being able to speak English well enough, particularly in the presence of Dr. Mark. In other words, the Thai teaching and face-saving culture overpowered the culturally safe relationship we had endeavoured to inculcate in the professional context.

Although the Thai teachers did not participate in the language teaching, the project inspired some of them to work on improving their English. This change was detectable from their frequent interactions with the Australian students teaching in their schools in the following years which, in effect, helped develop a closer relationship as well as boost their confidence in English speaking. Many of the Thai teachers have kept in contact with the Australian students through Facebook and this communication outside the classroom has enhanced the teachers' English language use because it has provided a safe space without them having to be concerned about "face saving" or protecting their professional image. Most importantly, it positioned them in an uncontested power relation.

Positionality and Power of the Thai Assistant

Over the seven year-transnational collaboration, there were two Thai university students working as the project assistant (one stayed for a year and another for six year). Their main responsibilities were to coordinate timetable information with the Thai schools and the Australian team, gather preliminary information about the schools, as well as ensure mutual understanding among all parties in day-to-day practice. As part of the university team, the schools treated them with a certain degree of respect. Both reflected that "their university identity made it easier to be accepted by the schools". They also expressed an opinion that the image of being involved in an "inter-cultural project" appealed to the schools because it would strengthen the school image and profile in the wider Thai community. One of the assistants recalled an incident of approaching a new school's director who disregarded her information about the project. She said that the director was "difficult but as soon as he met Dr. Mark, everything seemed perfect" and the school did not hesitate to become involved and he was eager to discuss with Dr. Mark his concerns and requests relating to the Australian teaching, knowing that his message would be received and understood in a culturally sensitive and safe manner.

The Thai assistants experience of liaising with the Australian students was more profound in terms of negotiating culturally appropriate and safe behaviours. Both Thai assistants reported that the Australian students regarded them as friends (rather than project staff), who were there to help them adjust to the Thai context (school and daily business). The Thai assistants also recognized that their status as a cultural intermediator facilitated their in-group positionality with the Australian students which helped lessen the disruption of project caused by inappropriate behaviour of some of the Australian student cohorts over the seven years. They spoke about taking the decision not to get the Nuntiya or Mark involved in incidents such as when an

Australian student was stopped by the Thai police because of drinking beer in a taxi (which was illegal in Thailand). There were numerous other unnamed inappropriate behaviours that Nuntiya and Mark never heard about and even through these incidents happened outside of the Thai school environment, such behaviours, if reported back could have reduced the schools' trust toward the project and the Australian students. Enacting the role of teacher in Thai society is a high-status position and teachers are expected to be an upstanding moral role model of Thai values, attitudes and behaviour. The Thai assistants negotiation of the Australian students cultural adaptation and understanding went far beyond the scope of the project and involved both the Australian students and Thai assistants taking up of new positions, position taking and stand-points as an emergent process of social and cultural negotiations of self. Situating "I" a cultural hermeneutic (Geertz, 1973) from which to see, hear, speak and make meaning mean drawing upon and reinforcing culturally safe social practices shaped in local contexts. These had to be negotiated and practiced in people-to-people interactions in which differing cultural identities, sensibilities and positionalities were put into dialogue

Discussion: Disruption and Its Becomings

Transnational PAR, it could be argued is located within "a rich tradition of alternative, progressive, critical and humanist educational theory" (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009, p. 7). Throughout the seven years, our project consisted of, and developed a series of dynamic social cultural interactions shaped by local contexts, people and cultural identities. If the formation of positionality can be thought of as a social process in which the presence of the Other is a significant presence, then as Richard and Schmidt (2002, p. 474) acknowledge, in materializing self, "a person's sense of his or her self is formed as a result of contact and experiences with other people". A prerequisite knowledge of each other's attitude and mindset (manners, openness, ready

to learn, rapport development), cultural skills, competency has been articulated as knowing in action (Schön, 1983). This action includes the way in which cultural adaptive engagement is employed to establish a sense of positional equality. Open dialogues and practical commitments to co-create the nuance of participatory practice, as well as the presence of the embodied identity were conducive to this process through each iteration of the project for the Australian students.

Transnational PAR it has been suggested requires "authentic knowledge of and connection with the experiences, histories of the participants" (Doungphummes & Vicars, 2020, p. 213) and, we would add the "researchers" in order for the participants to understand the position of the researcher as a co-participant or partner. Mills (1959) reminds us "the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community...do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such disassociation and they want to use each for the enrichment of others" (Appendix), In our project a collaborative and more utilitarian oriented partnership emerged that did not reproduce a wider existing normative cultural power differential within the research process. Being open about our non-heterosexual identities projected into the project a visible presence and gesture of queerness. This sense of who we are as people helped adjust our "privileged academic" status to a more "down to earth" positionality. Our queer identity in a Thai context indicated a more vulnerable and underdog position and this allowed the Thai teachers and most of the Australian students to be able to relate and develop non-hierarchical relationships. Being visibly queer, it could be argued, equipped us with certain positions that were useful for working with the Australian students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds in terms of the ability to empathize and to better navigate complex interpersonal interactions (Riggle et al., 2008) These social skills enhanced our understanding of the give and take nature of human relationships as well as our capacity to not represent "centers

of power, privilege, and status within formal institutions, as well as within the production

of…knowledge itself" (Muhammad et al., 2015, p. 1046).

Rethinking "I" as a context for how meaning making emerges from being positioned by,

to, and within according to Hill (1996) is:

> to contribute[s] to a pedagogy of visibility [to bring] language, history, and norms into
>
> question. This critical questioning is a political and pedagogical task in which issues of
>
> naming, representing, and making meaning and ... positionality... are central to exploring
>
> how... thinking and acting disrupt... epistemological, linguistic, existential, and strategic
>
> conventions and constructs (p. 253).

Vicars (2019) has argued how we generate ways to make ourselves coherent, re-shape and

reconfigure the stories we tell of ourselves and of others in research can significantly be used to

show something of how positionality and power are an inseparable element of research story.

In our work on this project, we have come to realize that, interpretation and analysis has

been an ongoing process; how we are feeling and how our partial experience of working with

each other has shaped our changing interpretations. What something meant to one, might hold an

entirely different meaning for another, and the "here and now" of our and the participants

positionalities meant that we could never view a situation from an "objective standpoint"

(Howell, 2012, p. 62). Ricoeur (1992) delineates that the uniqueness of human experience means

that an individual's interpretation of the world will always be different to another's and

accordingly, "the more one interprets the more one finds not the fixed meaning of a text, or of

the world, but only other interpretations" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 2014, p. 107). St. Pierre (2021, p.

7) advises researchers to locate research as a series of speculative gestures with issues of place,

and in doing so acknowledge how our entanglement with human and non-human others induces

the ability to affect and be affected by these entanglements (Haraway, 2016, pp. 37-38).

Other(people's) knowledge/s expose parts of the world we cannot see, and parts of ourselves that

we cannot see (Haraway, 1988). Situated knowledge making does not depend on the "logic of

discovery" but on the power charged social relation of conversation (Haraway, 1988, pp. 593-

596) with all the trickiness and unsettling that occurs with negotiating boundaries in a shifting

and changing world in real time. Being in conversation is risky, and opens us to surprise, it

requires both boundaries and surrender, we will not always be in control" (Haraway, 1988, p.

593-596) and this moving in and out of knowing and unknowing, underpinned the

operationalization of the project. Our mutual understanding of the incompleteness of situated

knowledge and positionality in transnational PAR is we suggest how we were "able to join with

one another, to see together without claiming to be another" (Haraway, 1988, p. 586).

Conclusion: Why Do We Think We Should Know What to Do before We Begin to Inquire?

In this chapter we considered how the principles of PAR in a transitional context can be

used to understand and frame the significance of cultural positionality. We reflected on how over

seven years we negotiated obstacles and critically considered the reasons why some of the Thai

participants were reluctant to get involved, even when the initial contact had a shared cultural

framework and understanding. The common willingness to sustain the transnational

collaboration between Nuntiya and Mark involved us in reflecting on the issue of not losing sight

of our own ideologies, practices and identities which pointed to our both being comfortable with

methodological "messiness" – which constantly transpired out of our transnational collaboration.

This chapter has looked toward how the various participants culturally positioned themselves and

of the importance of fluidity, liminality and the reorientation of thought (St. Pierre, 2021;

Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) for reconsidering what can be gained from thinking outside what is

already known. The implication for transnational CPI has been in interrogating how representations and performances of gender, race and sexuality operate as expressions of power in transnational CPI contexts. They can be potentially transformative as a space of, and for interruption. In our project we have, over the seven years, seen a questioning of taken-for granted assumptions, a troubling of normalizing cultural expectations and a taking up of unexpected position-takings. Interpreting positionality "is always in the middle; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 293) and is invariably connected to the social, political and cultural in which it occurs. It locates the enactment and interrogation of positionality in transnational collaboration as a dialectic act; a shaping relation that critically frames the meaning making process. As Rinehart (1998) contends:

> To handle the chaos of contemporary life, many of us have learned the skill of compartmentalizing, of classifying experience into neat, scientific components...But as we know from Foucault, how we choose to name other people and groups – how we categorize them - often tells more about us, about our stance on how things are, than it does about any truth of who they are. It tells us more about that which is true to the namer (p. 201).

To undertake constant self-reflection and critical dialogue about ourselves, our students, and the Thai teachers, deconstructing ethnocentric worldviews have been central to minimizing cultural differences (Bennett, 2004) and maintaining cultural safety in the project. Our understanding of our knowing in action was a result of our day-to-day work in the schools, our living in the community and participating in activities organized by the Thai university- each of these contributed to an understanding of how our "complex social identities can only be understood in terms of the power relations that shape the social structure" (Ellis,1997, p. 42).

Being ready to negotiate with cultural "differences" and engage with the entanglement of "messy lived experiences" created a "real" sense of partnership and a greater equity in our transnational CPI collaborations. Engaging with and through cultural space and place was particularly important due to the centrality of how our embodied identities and lived experiences initially positioned all participants. Reflecting on intercultural encounters and collaborations within her practice, Somerville describes the potential for local places to act as a "contact zone"…; "a material and metaphysical in-between space for the intersection of multiple and contested stories" (2010, p. 338). Encounters within the contact zone are unsettling. This dialogue requires the vulnerability of holding "one's self available to be surprised, to be challenged, and to be changed" (Rose, 2004, p. 130). Through engagement with walking around the local area, and making ourselves known to the market traders, Thai teachers and local food sellers acted as an agent of mutual defamiliarization. Our transnational PAR inquiry theoretically and methodologically articulated the generative and malleable processes of coming to a mutual understanding how over the seven years, we had tried on, shifted and changed our standpoints to suit different bodies and places and circumstances to make the project work. Our embodied and intellectual positionality and experience of undertaking the research has examined "the epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of certain culture and/or possessing a certain cultural identity" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 276). Our witnessing of and engagement with the "Other" enabled a process of meaning-making and transformation that accounted for the development of a(nother) cultural subjectivity. Our focus on building strong personal relationships with each other and the schools reduced the risk of the Australian academic and pre-service teachers acting as authorities on other cultures, or exploiting relationships for personal and professional gain. Liboiron advocates "specificity as a

methodology of nuanced connection and humility, rather than a way to substantiate uniqueness" (2021, p. 22) This specificity recognizes our different responsibilities and domains of action. This recognition of difference enables the possibility of "solidarity without a We" that flattens power relationships (Liboiron, 2021, p. 24). Liboiron's writing on specificity prompts us to consider the kinds of questions, positions and responsibilities that can arise when acknowledging difference and difficulty of connection. Being inside and being in solidarity with friends from differing cultural settings taught all of us in the project over seven years about both the possibility and consequences of confronting monolithic social narratives. Initially we moved slowly, and with uncertainty, starting with a personal question and spiralling out into conversation with other knowledges, and then spiralling back in to translate these knowledges into situated acts knowing. Walsh writes of the Otherwise as "a lived pedagogy and praxis...grounded in interrelation of all nature" (2015, p. 12). Understanding difference in situatedness is key to being able to enact change. One component of this is recognizing that there is no "clean slate", that transnational CPR "research and change-making...are always caught up in the contradictions, injustices and structures that already exist" (Liboiron 2021, p. 21). In contrast to the all-seeing eye, or the "god trick" of western science, which claims to see "everything from nowhere", Haraway (1988, p. 581) proposes a practice of situated knowledge-making, that is embodied and local. A "limited location and situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988, p. 583) require us to weave "webs of connection'" with others, so that through relationships and dialogue we may come to know more about others and more about ourselves. All point to relation-making knowledge practices that recognize power, boundaries, reciprocity, specificity and vulnerability as key aspects of relating. They teach us that we must be willing to be changed by dialogue with other people, places and knowledge. Otherwise, it's just a monologue.

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