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### Multiple Perspectives and Constraints on Progressive Social Change: A Commentary

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## COMMENTARY

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# Multiple Perspectives and Constraints on Progressive Social Change: A Commentary

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The reflections by Ritva Engeström and her colleagues (2014) on the use of Developmental Work Research (DWR) in intercultural collaboration between a Finnish research team and the practitioners, administrators, and policymakers responsible for information and communication technology (ICT) education in Botswana secondary schools raise an intriguing set of methodological, theoretical, and philosophical issues.

The theoretical framework of the project was explicitly grounded in the Developmental Work Research perspective developed by Yrjö Engeström, building on the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) tradition that emanates from ideas first propounded by Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Luria. A research team from Finland (a NoWeMic in the global North<sup>1</sup>) brought the framework to bear on the design of an international collaboration between two universities (one in the North, the other in Botswana, in the South), known in Botswana as the BeST project (Facilitating Expansive School Transformation through ICT) whose aim was “to find ways to support information and communication technology (ICT) competence of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 130). The theory was operationalized in the form of three separate “Change Laboratories” situated within three Botswana secondary schools (one semiurban, one rural, and one city school), where the concrete activities of teachers were videotaped and then “mirrored” back to the practitioners for reflection and discussion. Each school had a PC lab with 20 or 25 computers and had formed an ICT group across the curriculum to participate in the Change Laboratory along with insights provided by the research team.

So far, this looks like a standard intervention by Northern scientists designed to solve a problem in the South. However, the DWR framework explicitly sought to distance the project from

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<sup>1</sup>Although I prefer the multifaceted concept of a NoWeMic (a Northern/Western/More industrialized country), I have opted, for ease of communication in discussing this particular study, for the simplifying designations North and South.

“top-down bias and limitations of direct transfer of models and practices from more economically developed countries to developing ones” by “empower[ing] local actors to manage, for themselves, the collective transformation processes involved” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 130). Several strategic moves are presented for achieving this ambition:

1. The methodology was designed to represent “a formative approach that seeks to emphasize the agentic nature of professional learning, so that professionals become agents of change within their own arena” (p. 130).
2. “The present article is motivated by the need to reflect on potentials of the DWR methodology to allow teachers to become 21st-century knowledge creators in their local school contexts and, simultaneously, to develop a change strategy that takes into account the diverse frameworks brought to the table by the project partners” (p. 131). The multi-country authors note that “besides Botswana teachers and international/Finnish DWR researchers, the partners included a variety of educational professionals and policymakers from Botswana” (p. 131). They approached “collaboration methodologically as a joint mediated activity from the perspective of dialogue, not directly in terms of discourse but through a dialogical epistemology. . . . Along with the emphasis on dialogue . . . [they sought] to advance DWR methodology through developing one of its central principles, the need to engage in reflective practice” (p. 131).
3. “. . . [T]he present article is an outcome of reflexivity with/in which the authors have subjectively considered themselves in relation to their contexts in the project” (p. 131).

The three Change Laboratories were conducted in successive years, building on experience. They took the form of 7 to 10 sessions, each 2 to 3 hr long and held once or twice weekly. In the life of a school system administered by a powerful centralised bureaucracy, that is a very short duration, reminding me of Tharp’s (1993) sobering observation that many of the most important changes in the organisation of schooling “occur at a tectonic pace which experienced in biographical time feels like stasis” (p. 280).

Two major points of divergent interpretation were identified over the course of these interventions as “concrete disturbances” with the potential to generate productive social change. The first was

a local conceptualization of ICT as a *school subject (computer studies)*, which led to highly compartmentalized understanding of new challenges and conflicted with Botswana’s infusion policy for use of ICTs in the local school context. This practice went hand in hand with, and was interpreted according to, textbook and test-oriented pedagogy. . . . The CLs revealed that this institutionalized understanding and long-established tradition of organizing teaching and learning brought about constraints on, and conflicts with, creative use of ICT.

Second, although teachers showed competence in using a variety of digital technologies (with or without the help of instruction), the culture of PC labs with pre-given software constrained teachers’ increasing professional capability to develop novel ICT-based practices. . . . It became apparent to project participants that digital, mobile technology has the potential to provide a lighter technological infrastructure, one more connected to teachers’ (as well as students’) everyday life and their personal resources and interests. (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 140)

Such concrete disturbances, according to the theoretical framework of DWR, are “potential critical events that may include seeds of emerging new processes and of which analysis may

provide . . . potential new understanding of activities” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 142). However, the authors make the rather disappointing observation that “[i]n the BeST project, the view from below captured concrete disturbances, but it did not generate ideas productive in solving ICT implementation problems” (p. 143). Rather than construing this as evidence of a weakness of the theory or a failure of implementation, the authors derive two lessons from this outcome, one theoretical and the other practical. On a theoretical level, they began

to conceive of a CL as a new way of knowing that elicits information about the local microgenesis of novel solutions and about the possibilities and obstacles that will be met during transformation processes . . . In other words, a local CL intervention functions in the project’s whole as a new mediating artifact. However, these new modes of action do not guarantee that an expansive cycle has been initiated and may remain isolated events. (p. 143)

On a more practical level, they conclude that “policy analysis or what comes from the top should be taken into consideration within DWR methodology in approaching changes. This observation also includes analyzing the relationship between the new learning activity and the organizational vision of policymakers” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 143). This seems to represent rather belated recognition of a constraint that must surely have been obvious from the outset to project participants in the South. One explanation for this oversight may be the asymmetry of roles assigned to the Northern and Southern participants in the project. For instance, when discussing how to address “the socio-dynamic understanding of collaboration,” the authors take it for granted that “researchers who were the DWR experts in the BeST project . . . were [the] partners responsible for contextualizing the methodology” (p. 142). Indeed, the methodology was explicitly taught by the Northern partners to those in the South in the context of “an academic course (2008), ‘Socio-historical Approaches to School Transformation’ run by the international project partner to further educate the project’s participants academically, and themselves professionally” (p. 136). Whereas the content of the DWR methodology was designed to be empowering for actors in the South “to manage, for themselves, the collective transformation processes involved” (p. 130), it seems that by investing the authority of expert knowledge in the partners from the North, the design of the collaboration project may have deprived itself of access to intuitive theoretical understandings that were more accessible to partners in the South.

Certain features of the Botswana system of public education that must have been well known to the Southern partners are quite uncomprisingly problematised in the project’s situational analysis. The authors note that “[w]ithin the centralized management of Botswana teacher resources, teachers . . . are assigned by the ministry and have to move from one school to another throughout their careers” and critique this practice on the grounds that “teacher mobility harms teachers’ commitment to the school and community in which they may have no roots, ties or future” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 134). This practice, and another constraint on what the project construed as progressive social change, is attributed by the authors to a pervasive cultural feature.

Nationally, the schools operate in a centralized and hierarchical system with authoritative structures. . . . The schools adhere to a regime of departmental ownership of teaching resources and facilities. This ownership is manifested as regulations that designate the computer studies teachers as the overseers who run the PC labs and function as gatekeepers who regulate access of teachers from other departments. (p. 134)

I draw attention to this highly critical approach to the administrative structures of the existing school system in Botswana, not with a view to defending the latter, but to suggest that the national teacher deployment policy and the gatekeeping control of access to the computer lab are probably features of the “organizational vision of policymakers” with which a programme of effective social change in Botswana’s use of ICT in schools will need to engage.

As a statement of principle, I am in full agreement with DWR methodology that “academic researchers and practitioners should work collaboratively“ (p. 131). However the fact that logically “a practice-driven approach and an idea-driven construction of visions for the future presume each other” does not, in and of itself, guarantee that the two will “form a purposeful blend of different contexts inclusive of practitioners and academic researchers” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 131). Even when policymakers or practitioners explicitly aspire to follow the implications of research, programs in the real world tend to deviate in a number of ways from the precise implications of any given theoretical model. The authors of such models often attribute such deviations to either insufficient understanding of theory or eclecticism. But organizational adaptability may be a necessary pragmatic requirement of scaling up a model that works well in one particular location into a general cultural practice sustained by public policy (Korten, 1980). Furthermore, “One of the consequences of adopting a systemic theoretical perspective on context and its interaction with development is to enhance the salience of factors that might otherwise be construed as extraneous, incidental features of implementation” (Serpell, 1999, p. 58).

If the Change Laboratories are to serve the function attributed to them by the authors of this paper “as a new way of knowing that elicits information about the local microgenesis of novel solutions and about the possibilities and obstacles that will be met during transformation processes” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 143) the local actors will need to have the courage of their convictions. As the authors note,

This future-oriented focus on the idea of DWR intervention research as an emerging process leads us to a search for methods to support interaction and initiatives for novel social organizations, ones that are more transparent and interactive between partners beginning with designing the CL processes. (p. 143)

As I have noted elsewhere,

tempting though it is to import standards and practices from abroad, those in the periphery who aspire to play a leading part in the progressive reform of education would do well, in my view, to embed their planning in the specific cultural context of their own local communities. Designing a new instructional module or assessment instrument from scratch for a particular context may be arduous, but the rewards are likely in the long run to be greater than from seeking to apply an imported package. (Serpell, 2005, p. 221)

Thus, I am in full agreement with the authors’ concluding recommendation that

rather than waiting for given, possibly borrowed, educational reforms to take place in Botswana, efforts should be put into creating their own local (regionally managed) ecologies of ICT-mediated learning within broader scale of school development. These efforts will provide examples from Africa to be discussed globally. (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 145)

One inspiring collection of studies documenting such efforts was published by Dasen and Akkari (2008) under the title “Educational Theories and Practices From the Majority World.”

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