

Dear All,

...Ruqaiya ponders "purposes and goals" in human activity within an activity theoretic framework "over-time" in educational performance...

I'm using *one-ish* of the schools of activity theory in my study of peer collaboration in an EFL classroom during a section of a language learning program (I haven't had time to read the paper that José David sent, but will this weekend - it looks like a very interesting study). I have cc'd and pasted below a section from the proposal for my study which reflects my understanding at that time of how activity theory may provide some insights into the intentions and agency of the learners mentioned above. Right now, I am using Halliday's theory of exchange structure, thankfully taken up and expanded upon for discourse analysts by Jim Martin (and see also Eggins and Slade) which allows for a pretty finely grained analysis of the sequencing of talk from the view of function of speech as well as mood (see Halliday paper for elaboration).

The model of activity theory informing this proposal is based upon Leont'ev's (1981) expansion of Vygotsky's (1978) original theory of mediated mind, whereby a human individual never reacts directly (or merely with inborn reflects) to the environment. The relationship between a human agent and the objects of the environment is mediated by cultural means - tools and signs. This is often represented by a triangular model, as in Figure 1 below. Engestrom (1987) expanded this model to include mediation by other human beings, as well as mediation by social relations, integrating these mediational means into the model by distinguishing between collective activity and individual action - or levels of activity. This expanded model of the structure of human activity is represented by Engestrom (1981) in Figure 2, below.

Original triangle model here

Figure 1: Vygotsky's model of mediated action (Cole, 1996)

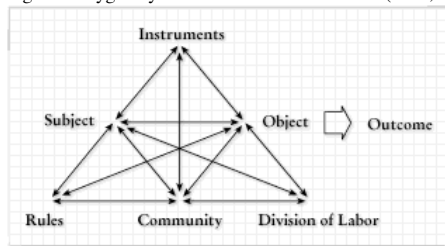


Figure 2: The structure of a human activity system (Engestrom, 1981, p. 78)

Importantly for Leont'ev, collective activity is representative of an object-related motive; individual (or sometimes group) action is representative of a conscious goal; and automatic operations are representative of the conditions of the action and the tools available. This tri-stratal model of activity allows for deeper understandings of an individual's actions while learning in a group setting. The top strata of Activity is driven by the object of the activity, and involves either an individual or collective subject. The next level of Actions is driven by conscious goal-oriented behaviour, while the final level, Operations - which are often unconscious behaviours - are driven by the conditions within which the activity is situated. There is often a movement from 'mechanical' operations to conscious actions when some form of complication arises, such as a linguistic problem or an interpersonal/intersubjective breakdown.

This complex theory of the structure of groups of humans working together to achieve a joint outcome provides some helpful insights for research into small groups of language learners during learning activity. A learning task is handed over to a small group of learners in a learning activity system, which subsequently negotiate a group object (or objective) for the activity. During the activity, individuals (subjects) will perform actions that may or may not be clearly related to the object of the whole activity, but which are driven by a conscious goal that emerges during the activity. The instruments of the activity system - the mediating artifacts, largely language - play a role in the achievement or otherwise of the outcomes of the activity, as do the rules, which regulate the actions and interactions during the activity. The joint negotiation of the division of labour during the activity also impacts on the eventual outcomes, as do the divisions of power and status of each of the community of learners, as perceived and possibly co-constructed by the group of learners. To see how the language learning activity system as the unit of analysis might look mapped out on Engestrom's triangular model, click here.

While I have somewhat moved on from this earlier point in my study, particularly in terms of strengthening the focus on Leont'ev's tri-stratal model of activity, I wonder now about Ruqaiya's and Eric's problem with analysing social acts over time - does the Leont'ev model offer some affordances vis-a-vis this problem?

Phil

I have attached this entire message in case your machines are not wholly macintosh friendly