

Activity theory and small-scale interventions in schools

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Published online: 1 August 2008
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The five papers in this special issue are tackling head-on some of the problems faced by researchers who try to engage with school practices so that research-based understandings can inform those practices and so that educational research may be grounded in what matters in schools. Motivation for working with schools varies from trying to change practices to trying to do better research. One suggestion, for example, is that closer links between research and practice can enable researchers to work alongside practitioners, become jointly aware of their anticipations and develop research programs which take forward both practice and social science (Edwards et al. 2007). The papers in this issue reflect a wide selection of the reasons given by researchers for working with schools; and they provide detailed evidence of the micro-processes of this engagement and the challenges they reveal for researchers, teachers, and learners.

The five studies are all interventions which aim at influencing the pedagogic practices of schools, and to different degrees most of the studies are also concerned with research outcomes and the learning of the university students who are involved in the interventions. The papers therefore present multiple purposes, of varying priority, over different time-scales. The challenge for the contributors has been to lift their analysis away from the useful detail of the micro-processes they have examined, in order to offer conceptual framings which might inform analyses of relationships between universities and schools. The analytic tools of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) are used in all five papers and rise to the occasion. At the same time, each contributor works in true Vygotskian style by assessing the usefulness of the conceptual tools for the analytic task and where necessary developing existing tools or finding new ones.

The social practices of schools are notoriously difficult to change for a wide range of totally understandable reasons, most of which relate to the high stakes national and international accountability systems in which most schools are enmeshed; and to the precarious fragility of systems of social order in many schools. Schools, therefore, operate as tightly bounded systems where retaining the stability of within school social practices is

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a priority for both students and teachers. In England, for example, a propensity to look inwards and avoid disruptions that might help schools, as systems, to learn and accommodate new ideas is currently inhibiting some schools' engagement with new inter-professional or joined-up policies for the prevention of social exclusion (Edwards et al. 2008). Throwing some light on how school systems may shift through working with researchers and how individual practitioners might learn to engage in alternative pedagogic practices is therefore a timely quest.

One cannot have lived through the last 20 years without recognizing that school systems can and do change. In England, new tools in the form of curricula have been introduced into schools and have rapidly been incorporated into the rules or expectations of school systems, and more latterly workforce remodeling has changed the ways that work is shared out, with for example more work being undertaken by teaching assistants. In activity theory terms, the introduction of new tools has been accompanied by significant disruption to rules and division of labor in schools which have been enforced through inspection, funding regimes, and the need for schools to operate competitively. These are top-down changes backed up by alterations in the wider socio-cultural conditions in which schools operate which result in major disruptions in the dynamics of schools as activity systems.

The studies in this collection are not attempting top-down change and have not negotiated the right to disturb relationships between the social practices of the school, how the work is shared out or indeed what the primary task of school should be. Instead, as the contributors usefully point out, they are talking about sideways or horizontal moves between universities and schools which in different ways, over different time-scales and with different intensity, attempt to influence pedagogy in schools.

Sannino, in her study of what student teachers learned through engagement in an innovative school-based program that was introduced by a university and not sustained by the school or the university, helpfully foregrounds some central concepts in CHAT understandings of activities and their role in shaping development. Her critical reading of how A.N. Leont'ev dealt with the idea of mind-shaping leading activities contributes to a developing strand of work within the CHAT field and, in the context of the special issue, helps us to distinguish between dominant and non-dominant activities, how they are experienced and what learning occurs as people, such as student teachers, move in and out of them. Sannino places her gaze simultaneously on the activity of 5D (the ICT-based intervention which was peripheral to the school and therefore non-dominant) and the learning of the student teachers, while also recognizing the material conditions that militated against making the innovation anything more than a brave, but short-lived attempt at changing pedagogic practices in the school. Her particular contribution is to take the long view and examine how the student teachers in the study dealt with transitions between the non-dominant 5D activities and the dominant activities of more traditional schooling that they met elsewhere in their training program.

Sannino's concept of transitional actions is based on the view that when students move from one activity to another what is called forth by accepted readings of the nature of the activity in each activity system is likely to differ and these differences can present learners with personal conflicts from which they can learn if they are alert to them in the way that the students she interviewed so evidently were. This analysis echoes Beach's (1999) work on consequential transitions, in that there too, a degree of awareness can amplify the learning that can occur. However, Sannino's emphasis on personal conflict as people move between contradictory systems and different interpretations of embedded activities maintains a systemic focus alongside the personal one to be found in Beach's work.

Both Nilsson and Nocon, in papers which also draw on 5D, pick up more overtly on the matter of time-scale which is implicit in the long view of outcomes taken by Sannino. In these two papers, the focus is the intervention and its impact on all the partners. Nocon reflectively outlines the problems of the different timescales and the different meanings ascribed to them by schools, research, and university courses. This grounded analysis reveals participants' frustrations and at the same time is located in recent work on the sociology of time. The clear outlining of the problems ensures that the paper makes an important contribution to work on school change and school-university research connections.

Nilsson's paper recounts a 10-year relationship between a Swedish university and a school and offers an analysis which responds to some of the problems of non-sustainability identified by Sannino and Nocon. As someone who is not involved in these studies, but is so aware of how high stakes education in England has inhibited school-university research partnerships, my initial reaction to Nilsson's contribution was that we need to look to the socio-economic and political conditions of Swedish education and the historical emphasis there on *Bildung*, or the development of the whole child, to find the reason for the relative success of this program. I think that the wider social situation cannot be ignored. However, Nilsson's explanation, albeit offered tentatively, is that the collaboration helps each institution to tackle its own problems. This explanation reflects the extent to which the intervention was a shared activity, based from the outset on each partner's complementary needs and was not simply the University's project which was negotiated into the school: both the school and the university department learned and changed. The study therefore poses a different set of questions. It does not ask, "why did the university study fail to influence the school?" Instead the research underpinning this paper has attempted to discover what 5D offers schools. The "case narrative" elaborates Sannino's advice that researchers should take the long view and contributes to Nocon's focus on timescales by distinguishing between changes in action and changes in activity. However, probably its main contribution is the idea of the relationship between school and university as a "thin string" linking them over time and able to withstand variations in intensity of the connection.

Yamazumi's contribution opens up a relatively new area in CHAT-based research on innovation. Here the focus is not a specific and long-term relationship between a school and a university. Rather several schools and a university are part of a distributed network of agencies which are involved in what is described as a "hybrid activity." At the same time, the intention is that the schools will change their practices to be more outward-looking and better able to collaborate with each other and wider society. This is an ambitious project and when compared with those outlined by Nocon and Nilsson is still in its infancy. Yamazumi draws on a development of activity theory which allows analyses of inter-organizational work, to explain how these complex relationships are developing. By using this analytic framework, he is able to bring to the surface, the contradictions that are likely to impede collaboration. He then offers the advice that the way forward should involve participants in focusing on expanding a shared object of activity i.e., they should (i) share understandings of the purpose of the work so that the purpose is understood in all its complexity and that they should; (ii) come to some agreement, albeit temporary, on what that purpose is. This is certainly the conclusion that the analytic framework suggests. However, Nilsson's case narrative suggests that the focus should perhaps be the relationship between the members of the network or the nature of the network itself rather than the purposes of the relationship. Indeed, Yamazumi's final point suggests that attention is now to be paid to the kinds of horizontal links pointed to by Sannino.

Rainio's paper on children and teachers' interactions in a playworld takes us in a slightly different direction because it is not looking at school-university connections. However, it usefully illuminates points raised in the other papers. Particularly, it shows how teachers are able to create and work within social practices which are not those historically sustained within schools and highlights the possibilities of shifts in power and control in pedagogical practices which were at the forefront of each of the other papers. References to the "figured worlds" of Holland's work on identity and social practices (Holland et al. 1998) reminds us of how social practices are not traps which impede development. Rather they can be analyzed and reshaped by those who participate in them, so that they can reposition themselves and continue to reshape their worlds and activities. Rainio's paper therefore returns us to the problem of engaging with school practices so that research-based understandings can inform those practices. The key seems to be the extent to which school-based participants feel the need to recognize that current practices require some development and are able to take some control over how revised practices are reshaped.

Several of the papers have highlighted the importance of relationships between organizations and practitioners within them, while others have used CHAT to identify the need for careful sideways or horizontal moves that may over time reveal for school participants that there may be alternatives to current practices and these changes may indeed benefit learners. While a focus on research relationships is not new, CHAT demands that we also examine the individual conflict and systemic contradictions that arise. It demands, for example, that examining conflict and contradiction is part of the process of creating new practices and repositioning ourselves within them. These five papers draw on different strands within CHAT and between them make a compelling case for the analytic resources it offers.

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