Discussion

Enriching activity theory without shortcuts

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Abstract

Attempts to identify an intermediate unit between collective activity and individual action within activity theory are useful and necessary. While several possible conceptualizations have been put forward, engagement is a relevant candidate for naming such a unit. However, the elaboration of such a unit opens up difficult theoretical questions which should not be overlooked. To avoid shortcuts in this endeavor, I discuss four challenges, namely (1) outcomes, not just purposes as the driving force of engagements, (2) dimensions and types of engagements, (3) the linear-temporal and socio-spatial aspects of engagements, and (4) the importance of contradictions, alienation and expansion in the analysis of engagements.

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1. Introduction

Attempts to identify an intermediate unit between activity and action are useful and necessary. Besides the notion of ‘working sphere’ or ‘engagement’, at least two prior concepts may be mentioned, namely ‘practice’ and ‘script’. In their book on the psychology of literacy, Scribner and Cole (1981) used the notion of ‘literacy practices’ to describe certain conventional, often repeated strings of actions related to reading and writing among the Vai in Liberia. One of these practices was letter-writing, which among the Vai was a fairly elaborate set of actions that followed a stable, culturally respected order.

The notion of ’script’ has been used in a variety of ways to capture strings of actions which are assigned to various actors in a setting. The ‘restaurant script’ of Schank and Abelson (1977) is probably the most well-known example. I have used this concept to analyze highly conventionalized court proceedings in different cultures (Engeström, 1996; see also Engeström, 2000, p. 964 and, for broader psychological background, see Nelson, 1996).

On the other hand, the general notion of ‘project’, i.e., not just the type of working sphere/engagement described by González (2006), has a long history, and there is a huge technical literature on project management. This project notion is similar to the notions of practice and script in that it refers to a longitudinal string of actions. It differs from them in that projects are typically seen as unique and non-repetitive efforts.

Using such intermediate conceptualizations as practice, script, and project to aid specific empirical analyses is one thing. Inserting an intermediate level into the general scheme of activity theory is another. The latter opens up a number of difficult theoretical questions which may be easily overlooked. It is perhaps too easy to add a level to a graphic hierarchy, such as in Fig. 9.1 (p. 310) of González (2006). To avoid shortcuts in attempts to enrich activity theory, I will take up four challenges, namely (1) outcomes, not just purposes as the driving force of working spheres/engagements, (2) dimensions and types of working spheres/engagements, (3) the linear-temporal and socio-spatial aspects of working spheres/engagements, and (4) the importance of contradictions, alienation and expansion in the analysis of working spheres/engagements.
2. Outcomes, not just purposes

Activities are oriented to and driven by objects and motives. Actions are oriented to and driven by goals. González (2006) proposes that working spheres/engagements are oriented to and driven by ‘purposes’. However, what exactly the difference is between a goal and a purpose is not made clear – except that purposes are somehow larger or at a higher level than goals. In its vagueness, the notion of purpose adds little to our theoretical understanding of human activity.

Professors and university departments produce publications, courses, and dissertations. Judges and courts produce trials and verdicts. Physicians, nurses and clinics produce various kinds of care episodes. Pilots, flight attendants, and airlines produce flights. All these are recurring working spheres/engagements, the chunks into which work is cut. They are also outcomes for which the practitioners are held accountable and evaluated. They are historically built into the object, division of labor and rules of the work activity – they are not arbitrary. This is very different from the subjectivist position of González who provides the following definition: “A working sphere is a unit of work that, from the perspective of the individual, thematically connects a number of actions and their goals towards the achievement of a purpose, has a unique time frame, and involves a particular collaborative structure.” (p. 146 – emphasis added by Y.E.).

In work activities, the most important working spheres/engagements are those that coincide with the recurring outcomes by which the work activity is monitored, measured and regulated. Working spheres/engagements, are oriented to and driven by outcomes, not merely purposes. This may be illustrated with the help of Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 makes visible that a working sphere/engagement is typically not merely an individual string of actions; it usually consists of multiple parallel strings of actions, performed by different participating actors. These parallel strings are not perfectly aligned and linear. On the contrary, they often take different rhythms and directions, even collide with one another. Also, neither an individual string nor the entire engagement needs to be continuous. They often contain breaks and dormant periods.

González (2006) provides remarkably little information on an activity theory orientated analysis of the historical development and current organization of the division of labor and framing of outcomes in the work settings he discusses. Thus, we have insufficient basis for identifying and analyzing further the key working spheres/engagements in these work activities.

3. Dimensions and types of working spheres/engagements

While it is not particularly useful to try and construct exhaustive classifications of working spheres/engagements, it makes sense to explore alternative frameworks and dimensions with which they may be analyzed and potential typologies may be tested.

As shown in Fig. 1, there are four foundational sub-processes in every activity system: production, consumption, distribution, and exchange. Different working spheres/engagements may be placed within different sub-processes. Most projects and certainly the ‘production issues’ mentioned are production working spheres/engagements, as, generally, are his recurrent ones. The beach party discussed by González (pp. 158–159, 309) may be regarded primarily as a consumption working sphere/engagement. Collective salary negotiations are an example of distribution working spheres/engagements. Events devoted to the sharing of ideas may be seen as exchange ones, and so may the informal interactions he characterizes as ‘requests’.

Within the four sub-processes, a further typology may be developed by combining two dimensions. Several times González uses the contrast between formal and informal working spheres/engagements – this is the first dimension. Earlier literature on practices and scripts on the one hand and projects on the other hand suggests another dimension, namely that between unique and repetitive. When these two dimensions are put together, we get a matrix of four ideal types of working spheres/engagements (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 1. The place of engagement in an activity system (adapted from Engeström, 1987, p. 78).](image1)

![Fig. 2. Types of working spheres/engagements.](image2)
In Fig. 2, working spheres/engagements named by González are presented with single quotation marks, while other kinds are presented without quotation marks. The ‘requests’ are placed in between the unique and the repetitive as their character varies. In fact, González writes that requests can be “informal in nature rather than being connected with work processes. . . . in some cases people made requests that aim to ‘go through other channels’ and short-cut the work processes. In other cases there is no formal process associated with a request.” (p. 170). While requests can be ‘routine work’, they can also be defined in an ad hoc fashion. González’s example of David and Joe (p. 148) is initially a request for help with document formatting and then subsequently evolves into one for solving a problem, which makes the distinction between ‘problems’ and ‘requests’ quite vague.

The most important implication of Fig. 2 is that it invites us to examine transitions of working spheres/engagements from one type to another in a two-dimensional space. It also makes it clear that the five kinds of working spheres/engagements named by González give a curiously lopsided picture in which repetitive processes and practices are all but ignored, excepting the recurrent ones which account for only 5% of those analyzed by González (p. 156).

4. The linear-temporal and the socio-spatial

González (2006) uses various terms to describe working spheres/engagements. Mostly he speaks of ‘chains’, but occasionally also of ‘sets’, e.g., “sets of interrelated actions associated with the same purpose” (p. 85), and ‘aggregations’, e.g., “the aggregation of goal-oriented actions towards a particular purpose” (p. 10).

‘Chain’ is obviously a linear-temporal notion which implies that actions follow one after the other in time, leading to some sort of conclusion or end. ‘Set’ and ‘aggregation’ are more ambiguous, but they seem to imply that actions involved in a working sphere/engagement may also be seen as cascades which are not necessarily arranged and connected in a linear fashion. These two aspects are also reflected in the author’s statement that working spheres/engagements have a temporal structure and a particular collaborative orientation.

Working spheres or engagements, and work activities, are indeed both linear-temporal chains of actions and socio-spatial aggregations of actions (Engeström, 1999, 2001). This duality is not theoretically elaborated in González (2006). His notion of ‘requests’ is a step in this direction. But it is not at all clear how one might represent the lateral or horizontal directionality of ‘requests’ as contrasted to our habitually linear representations of workflows.

The importance of this issue will grow as we realize the pervasive presence of various forms of ‘swarming’ and ‘teeming’ in human activities (e.g., Bonabéau et al., 1999; also Rheingold, 2002). In our research, we have approached some of these phenomena under the rubric of ‘knotworking’ (Engeström et al., 1999). These patterns of interaction just do not follow the logic of linear processes or chains.

5. Contradictions, alienation, and expansion

Activity theory was built on the foundation of Marxist analysis of history and society. Leont’ev (1981) wrote extensively about the contradictions of activity in capitalism. In work activity in a capitalist firm, the workers are alienated from the overall object, motive and product of their labor. The gap between actions and activity is not only caused by elaborate division of labor but, above all, by the private ownership of the object. This is magnified in the era of financialization and shareholder value, when the concrete outcomes of work seem to have nothing to do with the success and destiny of the company. Profit motive is the dominant management motive, not unproblematically appropriated and shared by workers.

If activity theory is stripped of its historical analysis of contradictions of capitalism, the theory becomes either another management toolkit or another psychological approach without potential for radical transformations. As Leont’ev (1981, p. 255) points out, “to ignore these peculiarities and to remove them from the context of psychological research is to deprive psychology of historical concreteness, converting it into a science solely of the psyche of an abstract man, of ‘man in general’.”

This tendency is disturbingly visible in González (2006). Management notions of objects and motives are accepted and presented without critical reflection. For example, using the beach party example, González concludes that, “the motive of the event, as understood by Activity Theory, was primarily to enhance the well-being of the team through the specific purpose of celebrating the team’s efforts for that particular year.” (p. 309). This way, the profit motive disappears, and so does the foundational contradiction between exchange value and use value.

When activities and their constituent working spheres/engagements and actions are analyzed historically, with a keen eye on their inherent contradictions, many disturbances and dilemmas in everyday flows of work begin to make sense. More importantly, new zones of proximal development emerge as possibilities of expansive transformation (Engeström, 2000, see also Adler, 2006).

6. Conclusion

The suggestion to construct working spheres/engagements as an intermediate level unit in activity theory is welcome. Such intermediate units have compelling presence in our activities and need to be conceptualized. The term ‘engagement’ is suggestive and may well become part of the conceptual repertoire of activity theory.

However, theoretical conceptualization is more than finding a term and describing some associated empirical phenomena. Serious work is needed to relate the notion of an intermediate level to central concepts and methodo-
logical principles of cultural–historical activity theory. I have pointed out four problematic shortcuts in the way González (2006) develops his argument, and sketched directions to overcome them. Activity theory is indeed an open theory that is constantly enriched. But the enrichment has to take place without shortcuts.

References


