Activity Theory

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## Definition and Background

According to activity theory, people's thought patterns originate in the cultural life that surrounds them.  In other words, people are born into cultures that have particular values, goals, ways of thinking and acting, and other factors that contribute to a cohesive and orderly society. By participating in the social practices of their cultures, people adopt the ways of thinking that are consistent with life within those cultures. Their thinking thus takes place in relationship with other people, both those who are immediately present and those who have helped to build the culture that they grow into.

Activity theory is generally attributed to Leont'ev, a student of Vygotsky's.  Vygotsky's sociocultural psychology is thus central to an activity theory perspective.  There are three important themes that are central to understanding human development from Vygotsky's perspective: an emphasis on human development, an assumption that human consciousness has social origins, and a belief that mental processes are mediated by tools and signs.

## An Emphasis on Human Development

Activity theorists are concerned with both the development of whole cultures and the development of individuals within those cultures.  Understanding how a culture develops is central to understanding the ways in which societies structure life to shape how people within them learn to think and view the world.  Activity theorists thus focus on development at several levels, including culture as a whole, the many sub-cultures that exist within them, the overlapping cultures that affect development in an increasingly global world, and individuals as they appropriate, resist, and negotiate the values of the societies in which they grow.

An example of how studying culture can inform educational practice comes from an

ethnography conducted by Heath.  Heath studied a set of small communities in the Carolina

piedmont region, including a small African American neighborhood (Trackton), a small white

Christian fundamentalist community (Roadville), and the middle class community with whom

they shared a school district.  She found that the three communities had distinctly different

orientations to reading that affected their prospects for success in school.

In Trackton, families encouraged high levels of sociability.  Children were encouraged to

go outside and play and otherwise interact with others in their community.  A highly literate

person was one who could perform verbally.  In contrast, solitary and isolated activities such as

quiet reading were viewed as antisocial and were thus discouraged.  This community, then,

enculturated its members with a belief that literacy is interactive and performative.

In Roadville, reading was taught through Bible study.  The Bible was treated as a revered

text that revealed an absolute, literal truth that was not to be questioned.  Children in Roadville,

then, were deeply enculturated to a belief that written texts have an invariant meaning that is not

open to question.

The middle class families fostered an orientation to reading that more closely matched

that of the school.  Quiet, solitary reading was encouraged, and discussions of texts allowed for

interpretation.  The consequences of these three different cultural orientations to reading were

that the children from middle class families had greater success in school.  Heath's study

illustrates the ways in which understanding the development of whole cultures can help to reveal

how individuals within those cultures learn how to think over time.  Activity theorists argue that

it is particularly important to understand cultural differences when students perform differently

in school, and to rethink educational practice to allow for more equitable access to school

success.  Changing the context of education can provide people with different developmental

trajectories with opportunities to use their culturally-learned knowledge in their formal learning.

An Assumption that Human Consciousness has Social Origins

As Heath's study shows, cognition has a cultural basis. People learn how to think by

taking part in the life around them.  In particular, they learn how to think by listening to and

participating in the talk that surrounds them.  This facet of activity theory helps to explain how

people come to hold particular world views, and more specifically, how world views vary across

different cultures.  A clear example would be that of a child growing up in Nazi Germany in the

late 1930s.  This child would be surrounded by discourse and artifacts that offer genocide as a

legitimate societal goal.  Through participation in this culture, the child would accept this view

and be considered a good citizen within the confines of this society for pursuing this goal, even

while it is regarded by members of other cultures as heinous and criminal.

An individual's goal of perpetuating Aryan supremacy originates in the overriding goal of

Nazi culture and is adopted by members of that society.  Belief in Aryan supremacy might be

taught directly by society's elders, or it might be more subtly suggested through the hidden ways

in which the environment promotes development toward these goals.  Social life in a Nazi

culture is permeated with these beliefs, thus making Aryan supremacy appear to be a natural,

unquestionable fact of life.

From an educational standpoint, activity theorists have attempted to reveal the norms--

particularly those that appear to be natural, unquestionable facts of life--that prevail in

educational settings and consider their consequences.  The norms of the white middle class are so

well engrained in school culture that they appear to be the natural way for school to be

conducted.  Anyone who comes to school with a different cultural orientation to literacy,

behavior, or other routines is judged as deficient, even if that person might be viewed as highly competent in another setting.  Entering an environment, such as school, that recognizes and affirms only one way of solving problems creates disadvantages for those not enculturated to those modes of action.

Moll and colleagues, for instance, were concerned with the ways in which Hispanic students perform poorly in U.S. schools.  In particular, he was troubled by the ways in which some educational psychologists argued that Hispanic students were cognitively deficient because of their scores on standardized tests and their performance in school-based tasks.  To provide a different perspective on the cognitive competence of Mexican American students, he conducted a community ethnography in which he documented extensively the cognitive tasks that were accomplished in everyday life.  He found that families, many living on ranches, were skilled at repairing and maintaining sophisticated machinery, planning and operating budgets, extracting medicine from insects, and executing a myriad of other complex tasks in their home life.  He also found that in the Mexican American community, most tasks were carried out in groups.  People shared funds of knowledge so that goals could be reached collaboratively.

These same students, however skilled at home, would perform poorly in school.  While the Mexican American community valued and encouraged collaboration, collaboration was discouraged and often punished in school.  Schools in contrast operated according to the traditional U.S. value on individualism.  Mexican American students were thus mismatched with the middle class values by which the school operated.  Furthermore, rather than solving problems in situ, students were evaluated in school according to their ability to solve problems in abstract situations.  Moll argued that instead of being incompetent at problem solving, these students were ill-matched with the school's way of presenting problems to be solved.

Moll's research, like Heath's, illustrates the ways in which frameworks for thinking exist first in culture.  These frameworks are then adopted by people as they participate in cultural practices over time.  From an educational standpoint, it is important to understand which value systems dominate school practice and to look at school failure as potentially a result of mismatches in cultural norms and expectations.

A Belief that Mental Processes are Mediated by Tools and Signs

The notion that cognition is mediated by tools and signs refers to the ways in which people think by means of psychological tools.  Many activity theorists focus on speech, thought to be the "tool of tools."  Others have argued that students have a "tool kit" that includes many ways in which to think that schools typically do not recognize.

Those who study speech often focus on speech genres; that is, the ways in which speech is orchestrated in whole systems of vocabulary, syntax, tone, and other factors.  To give an everyday example:  A person might speak to a baby using soft tones, a simple vocabulary, repetition, and terms of endearment.  This same person would probably switch to a different set of language codes while preparing a legal document.  Each of these situations requires knowledge of the appropriate speech genre for successful communication.

The speech genre of classrooms is typically associated with the discourse of the white middle class.  One characteristic of this speech is its politeness, particularly its indirectness.  When teachers want students to do something, rather than ordering them to do so they suggest that they might do so; e.g., "Is this where your scissors belong?" Students from other cultures might find this baffling, expecting instead something along the lines of, "Put those scissors on that shelf" Such students are likely to find the prevailing speech genre of school to be confusing

and become defined in school terms as uncooperative because they do not respond appropriately to the indirect imperative.

Literacy researchers have found speech genres to be a rich source of study. Lee, for instance, has studied the African American speech genre of signifying--a form of verbal jousting--to be central to understanding important works of African American fiction such as The Color Purple and Their Eyes were Watching God.  She developed instructional strategies to enable urban African American students to study their own language processes and identify their features, and then use that knowledge to inform their reading of sophisticated fiction.  She argued that African American students use rich and imaginative figurative speech in their daily lives that is rarely applied to their school learning.  Lee's research illustrates one way in which teachers can alter the kinds of speech genres allowed in their classrooms to enable a broader array of students to have access to success.

Other researchers have focused on how to broaden not just the speech genres of classrooms, but the variety of tools that students can use in their thinking. Smagorinsky and colleagues, for instance, have looked at ways in which teachers can open up students' cultural tool kits to allow for drawing, music, drama, dance, and other media as means of interpreting literature.  These studies have found that when students are given their choice of interpretive media, they typically engage in the same kinds of cognitive processes they use when speaking or writing.  Students relate literary characters to personal situations, go through an extensive process of composition (plan, compose, revise, edit, share), work collaboratively, and come to new realizations as they compose.  These studies suggest that students' thinking during literacy events may be enabled by using a variety of literacy tools.  Furthermore, a greater range of

students can have access to interpretive success than is available when only written evaluation is

provided.

Contribution of Activity Theory to Literacy Research

Activity theory serves as a useful framework for understanding how and why things

happen in particular situations.  It serves as a particularly valuable lens for studying issues of

cultural diversity, especially when the institution of school must provide an arena in which

learners from diverse backgrounds share facilities, spaces, texts, and experiences.  When the

assumptions that structure life in school are so engrained and invisible that they appear natural,

immovable, and unquestionable, then students enculturated to different ways of interacting and

learning appear to be ill-adapted and are often assumed to be cognitively deficient.  For

educators interested in issues of equity for diverse populations, activity theory provides a

perspective with great explanatory power.  It furthermore suggests that changing the setting of

schooling ought to be a key strategy in addressing educational inequity.  This direction runs in

sharp contrast to efforts to make students from diverse backgrounds more middle class in an

effort to improve their school performance.

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