Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

To cite this reference: Edwards, A. (2011) Cultural Historical Activity Theory, British Educational Research Association on-line resource. Available on-line at [INSERT WEB PAGE ADDRESS HERE] Last accessed _[insert date here]

Anne Edwards, Oxford University Department of Education
April 2011

Contents

Summary

CHAT offers a broad approach to analysing learning and the contexts of learning. In this resource I attempt to unpack some of the key concepts employed in these analyses by (a) taking a historical approach starting with the work of Vygotsky in the 1920s and 30s; and by (b) briefly differentiating CHAT from other strands of work to be found in the Vygotskian legacy. I then list some useful sources of additional information on CHAT.

CHAT approaches to analyses of learning and the conditions in which it occurs are attractive to researchers who recognise the intertwining of human thought and action with practices and institutional affordances for action. Researchers who work with CHAT usually start with an interest in culture and its relationship with the formation of mind and action. They do not see context as something simply to be taken into account; rather it is regarded as integral to the analysis. Culture is itself open to analytic scrutiny to show the rules, roles and expectations that can shape activities, and is usually revealed in analyses of how people think and act. CHAT research therefore often focuses on analyses of talk, as thinking and affordances for action are reflected both in what language is used and how, i.e. for what purposes, it is employed. However, CHAT researchers do not simply undertake interaction analyses; they also attempt to identify the cultural conditions which give rise to the talk and how the talk creates those conditions.

CHAT is often employed in analyses of activities in workplaces, for example, to uncover how people use both material and conceptual tools and what aspects of tasks they prioritise. It is also a

useful approach to studying how classrooms, schools or teacher teams operate as cultural systems which afford particular ways of, for example, being a learner. Analyses typically focus simultaneously on individuals as thinkers and actors, their relationships with others and the purposes, values and knowledge to be found in the practices in the institutions or systems they inhabit. These three elements (individual, interactional and systemic) are not seen as separate; rather they are in a constant mutually shaping dialectic. A CHAT analysis, because of the importance placed on culture, usually calls for primary attention to the system as the historical carrier of culture, while recognising the need to capture the multi-voiced engagement of actors in the system as they work on it and change it.

Other, more socio-cultural, approaches based in Vygotskian principles are better suited to research studies which do not start with questions about culture, but instead wish to employ Vygotskian concepts to, for example, examine interaction. CHAT's distinctiveness lies in its attention to the dialectic between mind and culture.

Introduction: CHAT and Vygotsky

CHAT was a term coined by Cole in 1996. It brought together his interest in cultural psychology and how culture is reflected in thinking and acting, with what he had learnt about cultural approaches to mind in Russian psychology when visiting Luria, as young psychologist. The colleague of Luria who is now best-known in the West is Vygotsky. Vygotsky had worked as a teacher and then a psychologist in Russia during the 1920s and early 30s, dying in Moscow at the age of 37 in 1934. Vygotsky's research continued a long-established quest: conceptualising consciousness. In brief, how are minds shaped, what gives rise to how we conceptualise our worlds? His answer was mediation, we take on and work with the ideas that are valued in the practices we inhabit.

To some extent Vygotsky's focus on consciousness or thinking fits with the individualistic concerns of late 19th century liberal thought. However, his attention to mediation was a breakthrough, opening the way to understanding how world is brought into mind. It helped overcome what had long been seen as the dualistic separation of mind from world. It has also been helpful for educators who are given a clear role in assisting learning through mediation.

Vygotsky's was also a Marxist psychology, concerned with understanding how people use conceptual tools to act on the world to shape it. He can, therefore, be read as modernist as he held the view that people can improve the world by their actions on it. Learning, from a Vygotskian perspective, is a process of internalisation and externalisation i.e. we attempt to take in and make sense of what we see as valued in our societies and work with those understandings as we act in and on the world. Consequently the role of education is to employ mediation to enhance the conceptual resources that are to be externalised in action.

From Vygotsky to Leont'ev and Engeström

An enduring problem for those who are interested in human learning has been understanding how cultural experiences shape how people think and act. Vygotsky's great contribution was that he recognised that all human action is shaped by what we know. That is, we do not simply act on the world i.e. externalise our understandings, but do so in line with how we can make sense of it. For example, a three year old may calculate how many toy cups are needed at a toys' tea party by doing one to one correspondence between the cups and the toys; while a four year old may count the toys and then seek the same number of cups. Their actions are shaped by different conceptual tools and their uses of these tools reveal to us how they are thinking. These tools are a culturally created – in this example, by a number system.

For Vygotsky the most important tool was language. It carries the meanings that matter in the societies in which we live and so offers a window into our minds and into those societies. A strong strand in his legacy is, therefore, analyses of everyday talk in order to reveal how people are interpreting aspects of their worlds and what that can reveal about what matters in the practices they take part in.
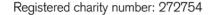
Focusing on individual understandings was not a safe activity in Stalin's Russia. Therefore Vygotsky's close colleague AN Leont'ev moved to Kharkov with his research team where the focus of attention shifted from the conceptual tools employed, to what was being worked on or 'the object of activity'. The object of activity is a central element in CHAT mainly because of the idea of the 'object motive'.

Leont'ev's analyses wove together motives, goals and social conditions, arguing that 'society produces the activity of the individuals forming it' (1978: 7). The interweaving creates the object of activity. For example, we can see how the motives, goals and social conditions of teaching create a particular view of a child's learning trajectory as an object of activity for teachers. The key element in the object of activity is the 'object motive' which directs the participation of the actors in activities. He explained:

The main thing that distinguished one activity from another, however, is the difference in their objects. It is exactly the object of activity, that gives it a determined direction. According to the terminology I have proposed, the object of activity is its true motive.

(Leont'ev 1978: 17)

The idea of 'object motive' is helpful when, for example, studying the various ways different professionals, such as a teacher or a social worker, may interpret the strengths and needs of the

same child. Each practice will be driven forward by a slightly different 'object motive'. (See Edwards 2005 for an extended discussion.)

The idea of 'object motive' is at the core of Engeström's work on Activity Theory, which also has its roots in Marxist theory. Engeström's big contribution has been the idea of the activity system, such as a work team. It allows a focus on the inter-relationships between, for example, the rules in the system, the division of labour and changing interpretations of the object of activity (Engeström 1999). Engeström's activity system is dynamic and open to change through working on the contradictions that arise when, for example, new tools are introduced and old rules inhibit their use. His accompanying methodology Developmental Work Research (DWR) (Engeström 2007) uses the Vygotskian idea of dual stimulation. That is, the analytic resources of activity theory are given to the inhabitants of an activity system as a stimulus for the analysis of the relationships between the elements in the system and recognise the emergent contradictions that will lead to change. A recent collection of studies employing activity theory across four different research centres is Daniels et al. (2010).

Other closely aligned strands: language and practices

This resource focuses on CHAT, but there are other approaches which are part of the Vygotskian legacy and which influence researchers who employ CHAT ideas and methods. One important line, reflecting Vygotsky's emphasis on language and cognition, is often referred to as socio-cultural and has been taken up by Wertsch (1991, 1998); Mercer (2004); and the team in Gothenburg (Mäkitalo and Säljö 2002).
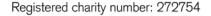
A cultural-historical approach which does not adopt the activity theory focus on systemic analyses, but instead focuses on what happens in practices is represented by Hedegaard (2009) and Chaiklin (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993). My own work currently falls into this category (Edwards, 2010). It reflects the more anthropological approaches of Lave (1988) and Holland and her colleagues (1998). These ideas have been taken into analyses of teacher education in Ellis et al. (2010).

References

Chaiklin, S. & Lave, J. (Eds.) (1993) Understanding Practice: perspectives on activity and context. Cambridge Mass: Cambridge University Press.

Cole, M. (1996) Cultural Psychology. Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Daniels, H., Edwards, A., Engeström, Y., & Ludvigsen, S. (Eds.) (2009) Activity Theory in Practice: promoting learning across boundaries and agencies. London: Routledge.

Edwards, A. (2010) Being an Expert Professional Practitioner: the relational turn in expertise. Dordrecht: Springer.

Edwards, A. (2005) Relational agency: learning to be a resourceful practitioner, International Journal of Educational Research, 43(3), 168-182.

Ellis, V., Edwards, A. & Smagorinsky, P. (Eds.) (2009) Ccultural Historical Perspectives on Teacher Education and Development. London: Routledge.

Engeström, Y. (1999) Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.) Perspectives on activity theory (pp. 19-38). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (2007). Putting Vygotsky to work: the change laboratory as an application of double stimulation. In H. Daniels, M. Cole, & J.V. Wertsch (Eds.) The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky (pp. 363-382). New York : Cambridge University Press.

Hedegaard M. (2009) A cultural-historical theory of children's development. In M. Hedegaard & M. Fleer (Eds.) Studying children: a cultural-historical approach (pp. 10-29). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D. & Cain, C. (1998) Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.
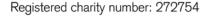
Lave, J. (1988) Cognition in Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leont'ev, A.N. (1978). The problem of activity in psychology, in Activity, consciousness and personality. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall. (downloaded on 29.4.2004 from http://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/leontev/works/1978/)

Mäkitalo, Å. & Säljö, R. (2002). Invisible people: institutional reasoning and reflexivity in the production of services and 'social facts' in public employment agencies. Mind, Culture, and Activity, 9(3), 160-178.

Mercer, N. (2004). Sociocultural discourse analysis: Analysing classroom talk as a social mode of thinking. Journal of Applied Linguistics, 1(2), 137-168.

Wertsch, J. V. (1991). Voices of the Mind: a sociocultural approach to mediated action. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (1998). Mind as Action. New York, NY: Oxford University Press

Useful Resources

A new journal has recently been launched Learning, Culture and Social Interaction:
http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/725413/description#description

Another place to find papers using the theoretical approaches to be found in CHAT is Mind Culture and Activity: http://lchc.ucsd.edu/MCA/Journal/index.html

The website of the CRADLE research centre where Yrjö Engeström is based at the University of Helsinki (http://www.helsinki.fi/cradle/) contains an array of useful resources on activity theory

http://lchc.ucsd.edu/ takes you to the University of California San Diego's influential Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition led by Mike Cole

http://www.lincs.gu.se/ takes you to the Gothenburg Linnaeus research centre led by Roger Säljö which works largely within a socio-cultural framing and has Swedish Research Council Funding which allows them to offer free short courses for doctoral students

This Vygotsky archive contains a rich set of examples of Vygotsky's own work and includes links to the work of his colleagues Luria and Leont'ev http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky /
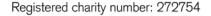
You may also like to follow the activities of two UK-based Centres OSAT at the Oxford University Department of Education http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/osat/ and in the Department of Education at the University of Bath http://www.bath.ac.uk/csat/

Much of Vygotsky's original writings are now available in translation in the six volume collected works published by Plenum and edited by R. Rieber and J. Wollock.

Vygotsky, L. (1978) (M.Cole et al. (Eds)) Mind in Society. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, was one of the first attempts to bring translated fragments of Vygotsky's writings to the West. Thought and Language was published earlier in English under Vygotsky's name in 1962, but has been superseded by a better 1987 translation by N. Minick Thinking and Speech. New York: Plenum.

The following are some of the texts which have brought Vygotsky's ideas to a wider public.

Bruner, J. S. (1996) The Culture of Education. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Cole, M. (1996) Cultural Psychology. Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Daniels, H. (2001) Vygotsky and Pedagogy, London: Routledge.

Daniels, H., Wertsch, J. & Cole, M. (Eds) (2007). The Cambridge Companion to Vygotsky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

One TLRP study employed CHAT in its design and analysis. The final chapter of the book of the project is a reflection on the methodology.

Edwards, A., Daniels, H., Gallagher, T., Leadbetter, J. and Warmington, P. (2009) Improving inter-professional collaborations: multi-agency working for children's wellbeing. London: Routledge.

The final chapter of Edwards (2010) referenced above discusses the analysis of practices from a Vygotskian perspective and is downloadable as a single chapter.