

# Collaborative Projects

*An Interdisciplinary Study*

*Edited by*

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BRILL

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## Conclusion: Time and Activity

*Andy Blunden*

One thing stands out from this collection, in which writers trained in and accustomed to scientific writing were asked to provide articles in which the concept of ‘project’ was the unit of analysis: as Helena Worthen reflects, ‘All the chapters are narratives’ and ‘while writing history sometimes leans away from telling a narrative towards collecting evidence and putting it into categories, here we have social science telling narratives’ (p. 357).

As I discussed in *Concepts* (2012), a number of writers have recognized two ‘modes of knowledge’ which I will call ‘narrative’ and ‘conceptual’ (Bruner, 1990, p. 35). The conceptual is often referred to as ‘scientific’ but this is erroneous as scientific knowledge is only one of many currents of conceptual knowledge and narrative may be scientific as well as unscientific. Furthermore, these two modes of knowledge do not form a dichotomy. As Lyotard (1979, p. 28–29) was the first to point out, we believe in concepts only insofar as they figure in convincing narratives, and narratives are intelligible only to the extent that they utilize valid concepts. These two modes of knowledge are inextricable and mutually validating. Some (such as Bruner, 1990, p. 45) have speculated that human beings have an innate narrative competence somewhat akin to the ability to distinguish figure and ground. In other words, narrative competence is a basic and essential way of knowing, both in science and elsewhere.

A narrative is not just a chronicle, or even a story line. What Ricoeur calls ‘emplotment’ entails arranging heterogeneous components together into a plot, in such a way that one situation follows from another in an intelligible and convincing way. Science, which is concerned with what *exists*, requires of its narratives that they are validated by their interconnection with other narratives, just as it makes the same demand of its concepts (Hegel, 1830, §123). The real question is: how does social science manage *without* narratives?

According to Ricoeur (1984), the leading alternative to narrative explanation for historical events is the ‘covering law’, that is, the subsumption of events or situations under a universal *law*. Restriction to such a mode of explanation in the social sciences is untenable, and until such time as social science were to reduce all the phenomena of social life to ‘laws’, narrative explanation is going

to play a central role. This is all the more true in the case of a relatively young branch of science, such as interdisciplinary Activity Theory.

But there is more than this. What the use of ‘project’ as a unit of analysis has done is to introduce into the unit of analysis of Activity Theory the element of *time*, which, though perhaps we never noticed, was previously absent. Although, following in the tradition of Vygotsky, Activity Theory has taken ontogenetic development and organizational change as its subject matter, and applied the experimental-genetic methodology (see p. 42), its fundamental concept lacked intrinsic development. A ‘system’ (CAT&DWR, 2003), like ‘structure’, is in-itself self-reproducing. But development – time – is intrinsic to the very idea of ‘project’.

According to Ricoeur (1984, p. 194), the relationships of ‘participatory belonging’ which constitute the entities of social science, the quasi-characters of its narratives, mediate between the quasi-plots and quasi-events, and the concepts which form the basis for a conceptual explanation. ‘Quasi’ because the narratives are not narratives of the actions of individuals but of supra-personal entities, in our case, projects. These narratives flow from the use of *idiographic* as opposed to nomothetic science (Ricoeur 1984, p. 195; Frank 1986), which has a proud place in the CHAT tradition, notably the work of A.R. Luria. As Worthen remarks: ‘instead of people as individuals performing the role of main character, we have a project performing that role’. It is also the means by which we escape methodological individualism (Ricoeur 1984, p. 199).

CHAT is characterized by the conviction that human individuals can only be understood in connection with their activity within a cultural and historical situation. As Mike Cole recalls (p. 362), Vygotsky further insisted that the processes of human life can only be grasped through observation of their growth and disintegration. As Cole’s reflection makes clear, these demands together oblige us to study both the formation and disintegration of social formations themselves. These considerations inevitably bring us to the notion of projects as units of analysis of human life, and the narrative mode of knowledge and explanation. Hitherto, an ‘activity’ or ‘system of activity’ changed only as a result of contradictions in their elements. But since these elements were external to the subject and object of the activity, change and development, whilst not being excluded, were not essential to the very concept of the activity as it is for ‘project’. For projects, the principal contradiction is within the object itself.

Worthen (p. 358) also draws our attention to the absence from the chapters describing and analyzing projects of the elements of an activity identified by Engeström – the norms and rules, division of labor, instruments and so on, the contradictions within and between which are seen as the source of both

blockages and of change, and also the idea of interactions with other systems of activity in the surrounding social context. This is true to some extent, though partly also because the same issues have been dealt with without the recognizable terminology of Activity Theory. But it has never been the intention of this project to create an *alternative theory*. The aim is to introduce into Activity Theory *one new concept*, the concept of 'project', which is to take the place of the unit of activity. All the past gains of Activity Theory and Cultural-Historical Psychology need to be retained. But the introduction of this new concept of the unit of activity will have not just an additive effect, but a transformative effect on the theory as a whole. The notions of the norms and rules, instruments, community, etc., and the understanding of interaction between activities will be radically changed by the introduction of 'project' as a unit of analysis. But it is early days. This book marks only the very first effort. It is vital that everything we have learnt about the internal structure and dynamics of activities (a.k.a. 'systems of activity' or 'projects') needs to be sublated into the concept of 'project' if it is to become a genuinely useful concept for the human sciences.

However, there are two aspects of the concept of 'project' which suggest a transformative effect on Activity Theory. The first is the element of time already mentioned, and the second is the concept of the object of activity which is quite different for each so-called generation of Activity Theory. These two problems (time and the object of activity) are closely interconnected, but before turning to the problem of the object of activity I want to consider the problems posed by the new unit of activity for developing firstly, the internal dynamics of projects (or systems of activity) and secondly, the interactions between projects, which arise by a reconceptualization of norms and rules, instruments, subject, object and division of labor consequent upon a change of the conception of the unit itself.

### The Internal Dynamics of Projects

Two currents of Activity Theory have developed concepts which need to be appropriated for a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics of projects. The first is Engeström's very differentiated concept of 'system of activity'. Projects obviously have a division of labor; in fact, division of labor is meaningful *only* within projects. All the reports in this book have touched on the division of labor within their projects (e.g. Power, p. 254; Beaton, p. 280). The instruments and norms and rules also need consideration (e.g. Cole, p. 135; Power, p. 249). Engeström's expanding triangle logo, for example, is a proven

mnemonic reminding researchers to identify and track these elements. But whereas these elements are distinct from subject and object, which are in turn separate from one another, for an Activity Theory based on ‘projects’, all these elements have to be conceived *integrally*. In particular, the norms and rules have to be understood as objectifications of the object of the project. The object here is not as it is for Engeström, but more like it is for Leontiev, that is, the imagined objective situation attainment of which is the source of motivation for the project and its *self-concept*, which arises from the project activity. More on this below. The subject is not to be taken as an individual or group at some location within the project’s division of labor, but rather the project itself is to be conceived as a subject-object in the Hegelian sense. In these circumstances, norms are both deontological objectifications of the project concept (Blunden, 2012) and the material by means of which the researcher can determine what the object of the project is. Not something *else*. So reforming Activity Theory for analysis by projects presupposes a considerable amount of work to integrate the notions of norms and division of labor into the conception of a ‘formation of consciousness’. Likewise, ‘outcome’ is not something other than the object, but is the realization or ‘unfolding’ of the object itself. Scientific study of the internal dynamics of projects presupposes that this conceptual work is done.

The other current of Activity Theory which offers considerable opportunities for the development of an understanding of the internal workings of projects is Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s (1991) notion of Community of Practice, in particular, Jean Lave’s critical work on the various modes of apprenticeship which mediate the interaction between newcomers and old-timers and how newcomers become, over time, old-timers. These ideas must be utilized alongside the ‘modes of collaboration’ already discussed in the introduction and the chapters above.

### Interactions between Projects

The 5th, 7th, 10th, 11th and 12th chapters above explicitly dealt with alliances between distinct projects, and it is implicit in the treatment of relations between child and teacher in the 1st chapter. In relation to such interaction, I have introduced a number of concepts for the prototypical ways in which projects interact with each other, referred to in the Introduction. But Engeström’s work on this problem has merit too. Although, in my opinion, his conception of ‘systems of activity’ and the boundary problems that come with the concept of a closed system is ill-equipped to theorize interactions between projects,



Engeström and his colleagues have done a lot of work on this which should be appropriated.

The basic thesis is that projects may share elements. For example, they may share what Engeström calls the 'object'. But by 'object' is meant here what Marx called the *Arbeitsgegenstand*, that is, the "raw material" or "problem space" at which the activity is directed and which is molded and transformed into outcomes' (CAT&DWR, 2003). So for example, rival political movements in a country share the nation as their *Arbeitsgegenstand*, or 'subject of labor'. They may also share semantic, practical and theoretical norms, and technical and symbolic instruments. These relations are crucial to understanding interactions between projects and we should follow Engeström in paying attention to them where interaction between projects is in play, and developing these observations theoretically.

The question of shared objects (in Leontiev's sense) simply does not arise in Engeström's theory; he is a 'behaviorist' when it comes to collective subjects. But the question of shared or conflicting objects has already been adequately dealt with in several of the chapters.

### The Object of Activity

'Object' has broadly the same meaning for projects as it has in Leontiev's psychology, as the imagined objective situation the realization of which provides the motivation for action.

Only as a result of [a need] 'meeting' with an object that answers it does it first become capable of directing and regulating activity. ..., 'filling' it with content derived from the surrounding world.

1978, p. 88

Whilst retaining these characteristics, for projects, the object of activity is not something outside the project which is the source of its motivation, but is *immanent* to the project itself.

For Leontiev, a person's actions betray their real, usually hidden or unconscious motive, which is the *personal sense* of the object for them, that is, it is *subjective*. On the other hand, the meaning of the object, which 'everyone very well knows' (1978, p. 129) is *objective*. This works well in a society where the objective meaning of everything is determined by the Politburo but hardly reflects reality in the postmodern, multicultural communities of our times.

The appropriate distinction is not between subjective and objective, but between the individual, particular and universal moments of a concept. In formal logic, the universal is an attribute shared by every individual subsumed under it, but such an abstract general notion is not what is meant here. In dialectical logic, the individual actions are connected to a universal sign by particular practical norms and do not necessarily share any single attribute. The concept is realized only by the eventual reconciliation of the contradictions immanent in the diversity of individual actions and conflicting practical norms.

For projects, the object is taken to be the concept of the object, or *object-concept*. Other projects have other concepts of the same *Arbeitsgegenstand*. The relation between the object-concepts of interacting projects is what Hegel called the *Subjekt-Objekt* relation. This is quite different from the subjective/objective contrast. *Subjekt* and *Objekt* are both independent cognizing, practical subjects (i.e., ‘formations of consciousness’, or what Marx called *social formations*), and interpenetrate and transform one another in the course of their mutual development, as described in the chapters above on AIDS and Asbestos, and the reflection by the Hunter College students on their own development in seeking changes in their college, for example.

What this allows is that the object-concept of a project, like the object of a design project, undergoes continual revision in response to experience and ‘feedback’. People set off to build socialism but end up creating an autocratic state. In the process of realizing an object-concept, the object turns out often quite other than what one expected. As Cole illustrates in his narrative of the 5thD project.

It is important here that ‘concept’ not be understood in a mentalist sense. In *Thinking and Speech* (1934), Vygotsky made a study of concepts. The method for this study of concepts was the observation of *actions*, in both real-life and laboratory conditions, and the determination of the concept which made sense of the subject’s actions. That is, he took concepts to be *forms of activity*, just as he took word meaning to be an artifact-mediated *action*, equally subjective and objective, not a mental object. What this means is that, as mentioned above, it is the actions, in particular those actions which are normative, together with the universal symbols used by a project, which together constitute the object-concept of the project and thus the project itself. The object-concept is not something *outside* the project, motivating it, but is intrinsic, *immanent* to the project itself and is realized as the project’s ‘end point’. But just like a person, and like history itself, a project is always a work in progress.

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