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THE AFFORDANCES OF CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY AS A RESEARCH LENS IN STUDYING EDUCATION FROM A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

Abstract:

In this paper the authors look at Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a lens to study education from, not only a socio-cultural perspective, but also from a socio-economic perspective. CHAT has its origin in the work of Lev Vygotsky. It takes as a starting point that human practice is mediated by tools or signs. The unit of analysis is an activity system and, in this paper, several activity systems are used as examples to illustrate the use of CHAT. The examples used are not based on specific empirical data, but on selected literature, since the focus of this paper is to highlight the affordances and versatility of CHAT as a research lens. Rogoff (1995) stated that three planes, namely the personal, the interpersonal, and the institutional or community plane might be identified in a socio-cultural analysis using CHAT. Conventionally CHAT is used as a research lens on the personal plane, where the subject is an individual, for example, a science teacher, and the object is this teacher's professional development. Secondly, CHAT can also be used on an interpersonal plane, looking at the interaction between various stakeholders. In this article the authors look at the changing nature of the interaction between university lecturers (facilitators) and tertiary students as an example of the use of CHAT on the interpersonal level. It is particularly on this interpersonal plane that this paper highlights the complexity of the "object" in an activity system, by revealing the "contradiction of control". Rogoff identifies a third way of using CHAT, namely where the subject is a system or a theory. In this paper, we conclude with two examples of how CHAT can be used on this more systematic-theoretical plane, with the subject being South African and Finnish education respectively. This is an approach seldom used in activity theory publications. By learning from the international "gold standard" in education (Finland) South Africa might succeed in improving its education, which can, in turn, catapult economic growth. We conclude this paper by looking at the #FeesMustFall student campaign in South Africa, where we juxtapose university management's perceptions and expectations, with that of student bodies. The authors argue that the holistic view that CHAT provides on tensions within activity systems is essential in educational research in a complex 21st Century. Educational issues such as these are not simply a South African issue of concern, but a contemporary issue in a post-colonial world.

Keywords:

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory; South African education; science education; self-directed learning; transformation; South African students' #FeesMustFall campaign.

JEL Classification: I25, I23