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Activity Theory: An Introduction for the Writing Classroom

People meet social needs by working and learning together over time to achieve particular goals or to act on particular motives. To facilitate their activities, people also develop and use tools. These tools include not only things like hammers or computers, but also language—probably the most complex tool of all. As people refine their tools and add new ones to solve problems more effectively, the activities they perform using those tools can change—and vice versa: as their activities change, people use their tools differently and modify their tools to meet their changing needs. Activity theory, which has its roots in Russia in the early 20th century, was originally a psychological theory that sees all aspects of activity as shaped over time by people’s social interactions with each other and the tools they use.

As a society, we differentiate types of activities by the specific knowledge, tools, and repertoires of tasks that people use to achieve particular outcomes. For instance, we recognize the practice of medicine by its goal of meeting people’s health-care needs; its participants, including doctors, nurses, and patients; its body of knowledge about human physiology, disease, and treatment options; and its tools, for instance medicines and surgical instruments. We recognize the university by its goal of facilitating learning, its participants, including teachers, students, and administrators; and its tools, including textbooks and chalkboards.

Activity theory gives us a helpful lens for understanding how people in different communities carry out their activities. For those of us interested in rhetorical theory, the most helpful aspect of activity theory is the way it helps us see more fully all the aspects of a situation and community that influence how people use the tools of language and genre. While it is easy enough to say that “context” influences how people write, saying this does not particularly help us know how to write differently when we find ourselves in a new situation. Activity theory provides us with very specific aspects of context to look at as we consider the various factors that influence and change the tool of writing.

What are Activity Systems?

The most basic activity theory lens, or unit of analysis, is the *activity system*, defined as a group of people who share a common object and motive over time, as well as the wide range of tools they use together to act on that object and realize that motive. David Russell (1997) describes an activity system as

“any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction” (p. 510). That’s a mouthful to be sure; let’s look a bit more closely at what Russell means:

- **Ongoing.** The study of activity systems is concerned with looking at how systems functions over time. For instance, the university is an activity system of long duration that began in the past and will continue into the future. We can trace the university’s activity over time and consider how it might evolve in the future.
- **Object-directed.** The types of activities that activity theory is concerned with are directed towards specific goals. Continuing with the example of the university, the object of its activity is learning, which is accomplished through instruction and research.
- **Historically conditioned.** Activity systems come into being because of practices that have a history. At any point that we begin to study how a system works, we need to consider how it came to function in a particular way. For instance, ways that the university carries out its activities developed over time. Many things we do today can be explained by the history of the university’s mission as well as the history of western educational institutions.
- **Dialectically-structured.** The term “dialectic” describes a type of relationship in which aspects of a process, transaction, or system are mutually dependent. When one aspect changes, other aspects change in response. Some of these changes we can anticipate; others we can’t. For example, when the university began to use computers as a tool in education, the ways that teachers, researchers, and students accomplished tasks related to the activity of learning began to change in response.
- **Tool-mediated.** People use many types of tools to accomplish activities. These may be physical objects, such as computers, or systems of symbols, such as mathematics. At the university, we use textbooks, syllabi, lab equipment, computers, and many other tools to accomplish our goal of learning. The types of tools we use mediate, or shape, the ways we engage in activity and the ways we think about activity. For example, if we think about the course syllabus as a tool, we might say that it organizes the work in the classroom for both the instructor and the students, which affects how we participate in learning activities.
- **Human interaction.** Studies of activity systems are concerned with more than the separate actions of individuals. Activity theory is concerned with how people work together, using tools, toward outcomes. In the university, teachers, students, researchers, administrators, and staff interact with each other and with tools to achieve the outcomes of learning.

Activity systems are also constrained by divisions of labor and by rules. In the university, for instance, the labor is divided among the participants—students are responsible for completing assignments; instructors are responsible for grading assignments; administrators are responsible for making sure grades appear on students’ transcripts. In the university, we also operate with a set of rules for participating in classroom and laboratory learning. The rules in many respects are our mutual agreement about how the activity will be carried out so we can all progress toward the outcome of learning.

One way that activity theory helps you more fully understand the “context” of a community and its tools is by providing a diagram outlining the important elements and their relationships. Figure 1 shows the conventions activity theory researchers use to present what they view as the critical components of every activity system. The “nodes” in the system are the points on the triangle—think of these as the specific aspects of a “context” that activity theory can help you consider more fully. The arrows indicate the reciprocal relationships among these various aspects. The labels we’ve provided to describe some of the components of each node in the system.

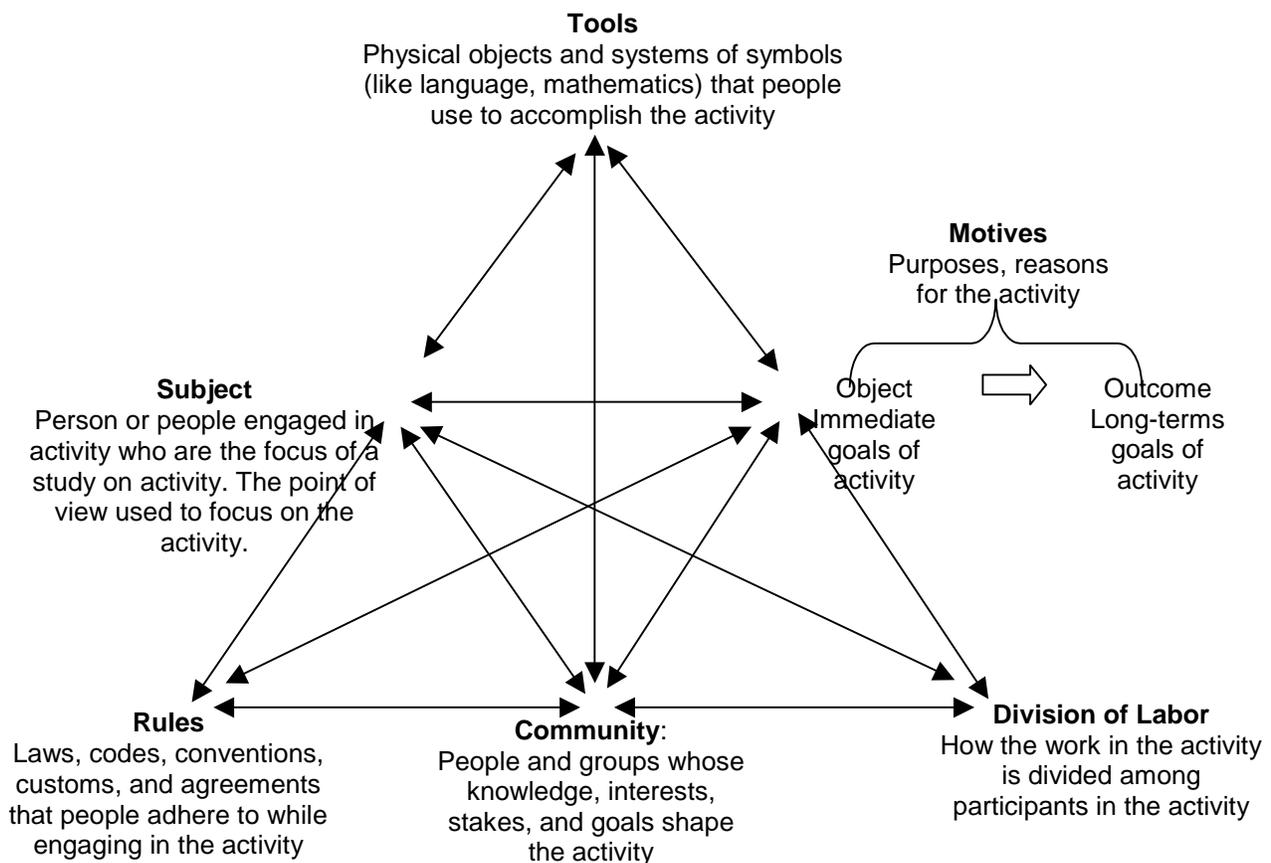


Figure 1: Activity System

How are parts of an Activity System related?

The **Subject(s)** of an activity system is the person or people who are directly participating in the activity you want to study. The subject provides a point of view for studying the activity. The **Motives** direct the subject's activities. Motives include the **Object** of the activity, which is fairly immediate, and the **Outcome**, which is more removed and ongoing. The **Subject(s)** use **Tools** to accomplish their **Object(ives)** and achieve their intended **Outcomes**. They are motivated to use these tools because they want to accomplish something and the tools will help them do so. The **Tools** that mediate the activity system include both physical tools such as computers, texts, and other artifacts, as well as non-physical tools such as language (written and oral) and skills. Activity theorists also refer to this category as "artifacts." When people first learn to use a particular tool, they use it on the level of conscious *action*; they must think about how to use the tool and what they want it to accomplish. Once they have used the tool to perform a particular action over a period of time, the use of that tool becomes *operationalized*, largely unconscious. Tool use only moves back to the realm of conscious action if something goes wrong or if the user is presented with a new action to perform with that tool.

The terms at the base of the triangle, **Rules**, **Community**, and **Division of Labor**, make up what Engestrom (1999) refers to as the "social basis" of the activity system. The social basis situates the activity in a broader context that allows us to account for the influences that shape the activity.

The **Community** is the larger group that the subject is a part of and from which participants "take their cues." The community's interests shape the activity. Community members divide up the work needed to accomplish their object(ives). The **Division of Labor** describes how tasks are distributed within the activity system. People might disagree about how labor should be divided or how valuable various positions within that division are, causing conflicts within the activity system. **Rules** are one way of attempting to manage or minimize these conflicts within activity systems. Rules are defined not only as formal and explicit dos and don'ts, but also as norms, conventions, and values. "Rules shape the interactions of subject and tools with the object" (Russell, "Looking"). These rules understandably change as other aspects of the system change—or as the rules are questioned or resisted—but the rules allow the system to be stabilized-for-now in the face of internal conflicts. These rules affect how people use tools. Of most interest to you will be the ways in which the rules affect how people use the tool of written language.

To provide an example that we're familiar with, Figure 2 depicts the class as an activity system.

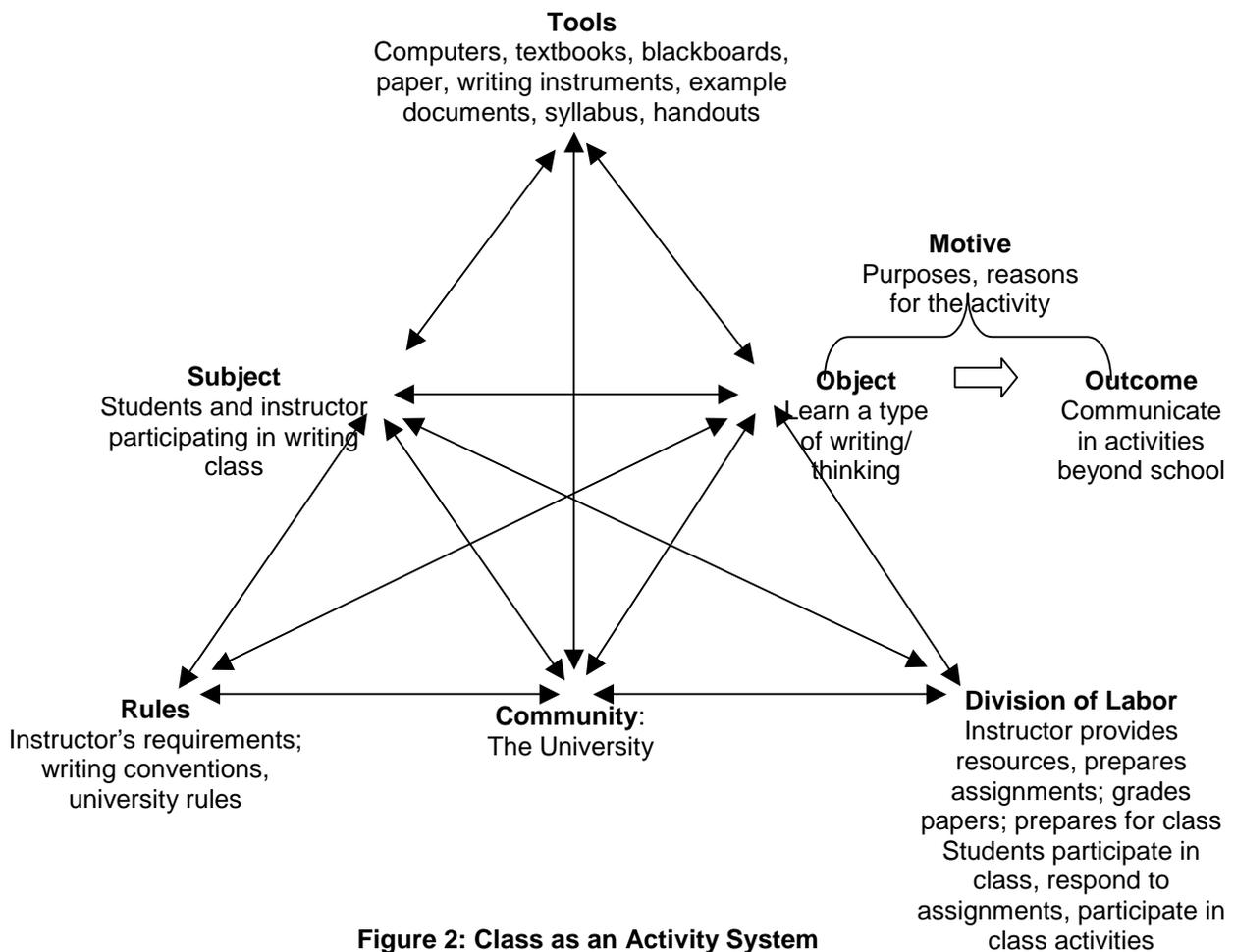


Figure 2: Class as an Activity System

How do Activity Systems change?

Activity systems consist of the interactions among all of the factors that come to bear on an activity at a given point in time. Cole and Engeström (1994; see also Engeström 1999) suggest that the relationship among the factors in an activity system is a “distribution of cognition,” or a sharing of knowledge and work, across the all the elements in the system. In this way, activity systems can be thought of as communal.

But activity systems are also very dynamic and, as Russell points out, “best viewed as complex formations” (1997 p.9). Change is the quality that makes activity systems—and really all human interactions—dynamic. As people participating in activity systems learn, and as new people join the activity, they refine their tools and create new ones. Or one activity system may be influenced by developments in other activity systems. For instance tools developed by computer science may be adopted in others system, for instance the university or the health care system. As people change the tools

they use, or the ways they use existing tools, changes ripple through their activity systems. Change in activity systems can also come about for other reasons. Social needs may change and activity systems may need to refine their outcomes or goals to meet those needs.

Change produces advances and improvements, but also complications and challenges that need to be addressed and resolved by participants within activity systems. Sometimes activity systems are even abandoned or absorbed into other systems when changes make them obsolete (consider for example the fate of the pony express).

What purposes does Activity Theory serve?

Researchers use activity theory to study how people engage in all kinds of activities from learning at a university, to working in a manufacturing company, to shopping in a grocery store. Researchers who use activity theory want to understand the relationships among people participating in activities, the tools people use to accomplish their activities, and the goals that people have for the activity. In addition, researchers use activity theory to understand how historical and social forces shape the way people participate in activities and how change affects activities. Three important goals of activity theory include:

- Accounting for aspects of a system to better understand the nature of activity.
- Analyzing how the parts of a system work together to better anticipate participants' needs and goals.
- Isolating problems to develop solutions.

How Can You Use Activity Theory to Analyze Texts?

You can use the basic tenets of activity theory and the activity theory triangle to help you better understand not only how texts function but also why texts used within a particular system of activity contain certain content and specific conventions, such as formatting, style, and organization. For example, if you are in a business communication course, you may be interested in learning how grant proposals are constructed in your field. You may want to ask, “What are grant proposals like in non-profit social service organizations? What kinds of information do they include? How are they formatted?” If you were performing a rhetorical analysis, you could look at a proposal and name its textual features—length, content, layout, type of language used—and name the rhetorical situation as far as you were able to understand it from looking at the document: writer, audience, purpose. While this sort of analysis is quite useful, there are many things it cannot tell you. For example, it cannot tell you *why* the document is a

particular length, *why* it contains certain types of content and not others. A rhetorical analysis also doesn't help you understand who does what tasks pertaining to the document: does only one person write it? Do several people contribute information? Why do certain people become involved in writing the proposal and not others? A rhetorical analysis also won't remind you that the proposal genre has likely changed within a specific social service organization—or suggest that you explore whether the features of the proposal genre as embodied in the text you are examining are uncontested.

So how do you begin your activity theory analysis? First, consider the activity theory triangle (we've included a worksheet-type triangle below for you to work with). Of the aspects on the triangle where you could begin your analysis, you (as a rhetorician) will likely begin with specific texts used within a specific activity system; for example, you might gather all the examples of proposals you can find written by people at a particular company or working within a particular field. These texts, then, are tools for achieving goals. At this point, using the triangle, a number of questions should present themselves to you:

- What is the immediate object(ive) of using this tool? Do all the members of the community seem to agree on this/these objects?
- What is the long-term purpose (outcome) of using this tool and others like it?
- Why are the people here doing what they are doing? What is motivating them to take the time to use this tool and achieve their short-term object(ives) and long-term outcomes?
- Which people (subjects) are directly involved in using this tool?
- What world does this tool function for? Who constitutes the community that uses and benefits from the use of this tool? Are the readers part of this community or are they participants in a different (but obviously related) activity system?
- If the readers of the text (the tool) are not part of the community/activity system, does this cause conflict or misunderstanding? Do the readers have different expectations about the object(ives) of the tool than the writers do?
- Who is responsible for what part of this tool? How is the work pertaining to this tool divided up? Are there conflicts about how the work is divided up?
- What seem to be the rules, guidelines, conventions (spoken and unspoken, formal and informal) governing the use of this tool? Does everyone in the community seem to have the same idea about what these rules are? What happens when people break any of these rules?

Clearly, you won't be able to answer all these questions (and others that occur to you) just by looking at the text. You are going to need to talk with people who use the tool of proposals and possibly even watch them at work. Often, people can't tell you what the rules governing tool use are in their community because they are only aware of them subconsciously. Remember that when a person uses a tool for a long time, it becomes operationalized, unconscious—what is often called “tacit knowledge”. So

in order for you to begin to see how and why the tool gets used, you may have to do some watching and guessing, in addition to asking.

As you fill in the triangle, remember that some things about activity theory aren't obviously present on the triangle: remember, for example, that actions are ongoing—they have occurred in the past and will likely continue in some form in the future. Remember that actions are historically conditioned and dialectically structured—texts look the way they do because past events have shaped them and they will continue to change as the other aspects of the activity system change. So, as you write your activity theory analysis, you may also want to see what you can find out about your document's history and see if you can identify aspects of the activity system that could be sources of conflict. Sources of conflict pertaining to the creation or use of the document will likely cause the documents to change again.

When you are finished with your activity theory analysis, you should have a better understanding not only of what particular tools (in this case texts, genres, language) look like, but also why they look that way, what they are being used to accomplish, who uses them, how they have changed over time, and how they might continue to change in the future. Keep in mind, however, that an outsider—someone who is not a part of a particular activity system—can never fully grasp the hows and whys of that system. Some things will remain a mystery to you; some things, in fact, even remain a mystery to insiders. Perhaps you've heard people say, "I don't know why we do it that way, we just do." However, if you are constantly asking the questions activity theory presents to you, you will be far less likely to say something like this. You will be more likely to recognize rules (whether stated or not) and to understand why you are doing something. In this way, you will become a much savvier communicator.

Works Cited

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Tools (List the tools—both material and intellectual—used by the Subject)

Activity System Worksheet

Use this worksheet to help you begin thinking about the elements of the activity system you are considering and their relationships.

Describe the tool that you plan to focus on.

