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An Activity Theoretical Approach to Designing Curriculum and Instruction That Shift the Means and Ends of History Education

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Abstract: Reformers want history education to help students learn to engage in historical inquiry, read critically across conflicting sources, and engage in civil discussion of controversial issues. How can we help teachers and students shift the roles, norms, and activity in history classrooms to achieve these aims? An activity-theoretical framework suggests the value of explicitly attending to multiple aspects of human activity when designing and presenting reform-oriented pedagogies or curricula. Such attention increases the odds that teachers who implement new approaches or curriculum will achieve significant shifts in the means and ends of history education.

An activity theoretical approach to designing curriculum and instruction that shift the means and ends of history education

Reformers' have ambitious aims for history education, including helping students to engage in historical inquiry, read critically across conflicting sources, and engage in civil discussion of controversial issues. How can we help teachers and students shift the roles, norms, and activity in history classrooms to achieve these aims?

This paper develops a theoretical—or theory-based—answer to this question. To consider how pedagogical approaches and curriculum materials designed for K-12 educators might help those educators shift the means and ends of their work, I develop an activity theoretical framework to make sense of how human beings jointly create things through activity. I use this framework to consider how a single new kind of pedagogical activity—such as having students work to "rate" presidencies—might create opportunities for professional development and for reforming social studies teaching.

The problem: The persistence of traditional history teaching practices and the limited impact of reform-oriented practices

Before developing a theoretical explanation of how a new curriculum or pedagogical approach might be educative for teachers—how presenting and engaging in one single activity might lead to other changes in related activities beyond the immediate approach or curriculum—it is important to sketch the current context for reform of social studies curriculum. Many reformers hope that K-12 teaching will help students to "do" history, or to engage in lively and participative activities bringing the past—and the nature of history—

to life (Levstik & Barton, 2001). Though interest in infusing disciplinary methods and inquiry into K-12 history teaching has emerged as several times over the last 120 years, the predominant, traditional modes of history teaching have been "fact-filled textbooks, curricular guides laid out in chronological order, and teacher-centered pedagogy committed to transmitting content" (Cuban, in Vansledright, 2002, p. viii). History textbooks are typically written by committee to meet the standards of the most populous states. The result is often turgid and lifeless prose, offering history as objective conclusions already reached rather than a mechanism for sorting through conflicting interpretations, multiple perspectives, and the implications for the present (American Textbook Council, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1979; Kobrin, 1996). The limits of typical history teaching and textbooks may explain why students, when surveyed, call the discipline boring (Loewen, 1995; Wiley & Race, 1977).

Research supports the depiction of typical history instruction as relying predominantly on lecture and textbooks, and reducing a conflict-filled discipline to a boring forced march through names and dates (Cuban, 1994; Wiley & Race, 1977). This broad-brush stroke capturing enduring patterns across the 20th century, is too simplistic and caricatured to capture the reality of variation instructional practices that unfold in individual classrooms; teachers use all that they know in complex mixtures of new and old approaches towards a wide diversity of aims, but the overall direction of instruction in history and other disciplines has proven impervious to significant change efforts (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Skilled observers of teacher learning and curricular innovation have also described how teachers may be exposed to a new approach, but are likely to interpret through their existing beliefs and practices in ways that ultimately prevent significant shifts in actual patterns of

teaching and learning (Cohen, 1990). Similarly, it is not uncommon for teachers and others to appropriate words—such as "community of practice" or implementing "writing response groups"—without a clear or precise of understanding of the practice and its underlying principles (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). Those who seek to propagate new pedagogies for teaching social studies must be wary of the possibility that teachers glibly believe or declare that they are adopting a new approach without actually learning its underlying intended outcomes, principles, or key features.

Developing and presenting pedagogies and resources in ways that shift the means and ends of joint activity in history classrooms

Change is difficult in most realms. Teaching is no exception. The history of school reform in the United States is littered with well-funded projects, movements, and efforts which wash up against the walls of schools, sometimes with great fanfare, and then recede, often leaving limited impact on the actual practice of teachers (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, Cuban, 1993). As noted above, it is also possible for teachers to become exposed to a new pedagogy, and to believe they are adopting it with great enthusiasm without realizing the extent to which they're underlying means and ends have not really shifted (Cohen, 1990). Researchers have shown how teachers can appropriate new pedagogical approaches with differing levels of depth and understanding, and thus, with differing implications for how deeply their alleged use of new approaches really impacts their teaching (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). We all use what we know and do to interpret what is new, sometimes changing significantly what others give us in order to incorporate it into our own worldview or pattern of working. Accomplishing fundamental shifts in orientation is

not easy, and often changing just one element of one's work will not significantly alter larger means and ends.

When curriculum developers and professional developers seek to introduce new curriculum materials or pedagogical approaches that intentionally aim to transform common means and ends of a teachers' work, they must confront questions of how best to help teachers see and change their work. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss what will motivate teachers to change; here, I simply posit that some teachers maintain a stance of openness to change and experimentation. Other teachers can become willing to change when data about student learning, collegial encouragement and pressure, or other systemic incentives and pressures motivate them to change.

Even when teachers are open to change, what might curriculum writers, professional developers, and lead teachers consider or do to help teachers achieve more significant and lasting changes in the activity that unfolds in their classroom rather than superficial appropriation of new buzzwords? To be more specific to the field of social studies, how might we help teachers why rely more on traditional means of teaching to now put students in a position to construct their own nuanced understandings of history and civics (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Wineburg, 2001)? How can we help teachers rethink multiple aspects of the work they do and the experiences they create for students so that students can "do history," i.e., engage in the kinds of critical thinking and inquiry that historians do when they look within and across conflicting sources (Levstik & Barton, 2001; VanSledright & Brophy 1997; Wineburg, 2001)? Achieving these ambitious aims will require a clear shift in roles, resources, and intended purposes in social studies education, since the predominant modes of history teaching have been "fact-filled textbooks, curricular guides laid out in

chronological order, and teacher-centered pedagogy committed to transmitting content" (Cuban, in Vansledright, 2002, p. viii); teachers must not only work on their own practice, but work on their own students' expectations. In sum, how might we help teachers and students shift out of often-deeply engrained roles and expectations regarding history teaching and learning?

To think about this question, it would be helpful to first make sense of joint activity- the things we do in classrooms, and how elements of that activity combine to produce outcomes. Having some way of parsing or seeing aspects of human activity could help us think about how the design and presentation of new pedagogies can help teachers to see their work and alternatives, to grasp multiple implications of adopting an alternative for their work in classrooms, and to successfully shift the nature and outcomes of their teaching.

Activity theory can help us to help identify key aspects of the joint activity teachers and students do in traditional social studies classrooms, and then to think about how to shift it. Activity theory takes, as its unit of analysis, activity structures. It seeks to provide a theoretical account and set of tools for understanding goal-oriented, "collective, and culturally mediated human activity" (Engeström and Mietennen, 1999; Engeström, 1999). At the heart of activity theory is the insight that all of human life is organized to produce things, that we engage in practices with others to produce these (not necessarily material) things, and that our ability to produce things and engage with others is mediated by artifacts. In the next section, I identify key components of activity structures, and then use the heuristic affordances of these analytic categories to make sense of the means and ends of traditional historical teaching, taking as an example how students would traditionally learn about a U.S. president. I then use this theoretical framework to suggest what is necessary for

an alternative activity addressing the same topic to help teachers and students to work together in new ways, producing different outcomes.

Activity Theoretical tools for making sense of collective human activities like teaching and learning history

Activity theory might best be seen as a meta-theory, or a high-level and encompassing set of principles and understandings that can guide the construction of theory at a lower level (Engeström, 1993). Whether the activity in question unfolds in a classroom or in an activity unrelated to education, collective activities are theorized to have the following seven key components, all of which relate to each other, and all of which might help us envision points of leverage or resistance to accomplishing deep changes in activity.

At a simple level, we can think of a relationship among three components: (1) Subjects, (2) objects, and (3) mediating artifacts. Any activity has subjects –human actors— who seek to work with objects, which can be either material or conceptual things that exist outside of them. A person can carve a canoe out of a log; a teacher can seek to impart the causes of the civil war to eleventh graders. In both of these examples, there are mediating artifacts, including physical tools and mental concepts, which can both facilitate and constrain how the activity unfolds and what it can ultimately produce. The canoe carver will benefit from having a tool, or preferably multiple sharp tools. A traditional history teacher may employ material resources such as a textbook's text and illustrations, as well as a PowerPoint presentation. The teacher may have other conceptual tools for teaching—a timeline as graphic organizer, a theory regarding how students build knowledge more effectively upon things they already know; similarly, the activity of carving the boat may be

mediated by scientific or aesthetic ideas that exist in the mind of the carver. (see Cole, 2000, or Engestrom, 1999, for more detailed presentations of these ideas.)

So achieving changes in activity may be facilitated by altering the mediating artifacts—both material and conceptual—available to subjects, and by helping the subjects to orient to different or additional objects in the world.

Activity theory has further posited that in goal-oriented, human activity, three more key components affect how artifacts mediate subjects use of mediating artifacts while working with objects like knowledge of history. The first of these, rules, can include unspoken norms, i.e., shared expectations regarding how things should be done. The second, division of labor, could be understood as roles, or the exact work that different people do. Finally, activities happen in the context of community; there may be contributions or participation by an extended set of participants. I illustrate these aspects of activity in Table 1, comparing traditional lecturing and textbook reading with one hypothetical reform-oriented practice: Having students evaluate multiple sources assessing a U.S. president, and then sit together in the effort to reach consensus in articulating a rating of that president.

Table 1 **Considering how presidential rating sessions shift key aspects of human activity when compared with traditional lecture & textbook reading**

	Traditional lecture and textbook reading	Presidential Rating sessions
Subjects	Teacher, students	Teacher, students
Object	Facts about presidents and their administrations/policies	Data-based judgments regarding the impact of presidents and their administrations/policies
Mediating artifacts	• single textbook • lecture notes that uncritically document the historical content teacher presents • notion of history as learning facts	• multiple textual accounts • reading notes that capture student interpretation, synthesis, and judgment regarding material • notion of history as inquiry and constructed understanding
Division of labor	• Teacher as dispenser of knowledge, ultimate arbiter of correct answers. • Teacher as judge of progress via scoring tests and essays. • Students as empty vessels to passively fill themselves with knowledge from teacher and textbook.	• Teachers as facilitator selecting texts and structuring experiences; • Teacher as coach providing modeling, training, and feedback. • Teacher as providing some assessment via tests or essays, but also facilitating individual and group reflection and self-assessment. • Students as active participants in constructing own knowledge and judgments, and in seeking to convince or be convinced by others' ideas. • Students as co-participants in judging both the meaning of historical material and progress towards mastering the goals of the activity.
Rules/ norms	• Students to remain quiet during most of class • Students to bring questions to teacher only • teacher is final authority on what happened, what it means	• student talk and questions are normal & desirable features of class • students may question text, teacher, and peers' ideas • students responsible for deciding what happened, what it means, based upon critical review of texts
Community	(beyond teacher and students) • authors of textbook	(beyond teacher and students) • authors of multiple accounts • historians who have also rated Presidents
Outcome	• Successful memorization of key facts and ideas presented in book or lecture; • perhaps, the ability to explain/defend a position built	• Ability to sort through multiple perspectives and form own understanding; • Ability to engage people and ideas critically and constructively, seeking both to explore differences

	on facts and ideas presented.	and identify areas of commonality.

All of this activity—the whole interrelated system—has an intended outcome (Cole, 1996, based upon Engeström, 1987). Engeström published a triangular graphic to help envision the key variables and their entire inter-relationship. (See Appendix, which includes an illustrative example.)

Activity theoretical categories as an aide to discussing the transformation of history teaching

The key categories of activity theory help us consider how introducing a new pedagogy to a teacher's work might change not just a single element of activity in a classroom, but has the potential to rework multiple aspects of typical activity structures, and thus could produce a deeper transformation of teaching and learning than the superficial adoption of a buzzword. These categories can help designers of curriculum think about the multiple aspects of activity that must change for reform-oriented pedagogies to realize their potential. Even better, being explicit about these categories—about what activity can often look like, and how we want roles, mediating tools, and the division of labor to change in classrooms—may help us to use curriculum materials and pedagogical approaches as a chance to help teachers develop themselves. Being explicit about what could change, and helping teachers with all aspects of the changes we seek, may help us to avoid superficial appropriation of new approaches, and to make teachers active constructors of their own transformation.

I propose using activity theory as a heuristic for identify key components of activity in order to support all involved in changing activity; activity theorists could justifiably view

this as very partial use of the full affordances of activity theory. Activity theory sees complex interrelationships among these factors, and the ways in which these seemingly distinct aspects of activity are deeply interwoven among each other and in producing outcomes; shifts in one or several elements will inevitably affect others. Thus, an additional use of this framework would be to proceed to look within pilot tests and full-blown classroom implementation to see whether—and how—new pedagogies or curriculum do reconfigure key aspects of classroom activity, and with what implications for what is produced. In other words, close ethnographic observation combined with measures of outcomes can help us account for changes in the processes and products of history teaching.

Conclusions

How can we help Social Studies teachers and students shift the roles, norms, and activity in history classrooms to achieve reformers' ambitious aims? This paper answers by offering a theoretical response to this question of how we can help teachers shift the roles, norms, and activity in history classrooms. It uses an activity theoretical framework to identify the constituent components of activity which we seek to change, and thus to identify those aspects of classroom activity we must address while helping teachers to change their own teaching. This paper suggests how clarity about classroom activities—their means and ends—can help us develop and present new curriculum and new pedagogical approaches in ways that scaffold teacher learning rather than seeking to enable teachers to implement that specific curriculum. To the extent that we can help teachers understand the ultimate aims and the component parts of the activities we seek to create, we can empower them with an expanded view of multiple aspects of the activities they co-construct with their students, and

of the possible shifts they can attempt in their larger purposes and outcomes. Teachers and students, after years of adjusting to one set of patterns and activity while learning history, will have understandable challenges in accepting and accomplishing significant shifts required to meet reformers ambitions for the Social Studies.

We who support teachers must develop both specific approaches to teaching and larger conceptual tools that may help individuals to change. Empirical research and practitioners' own efforts can now determine whether the activity theoretical categories used here can help teachers to achieve more ambitious outcomes in their history instruction.

Appendix : Engeström's pyramid as a visual representation of the interrelationship of elements of activity, plus an illustrative example of an activity structure

Applying Engeström's pyramid to a hypothetical case of Joint Work

Figure One: Engeström's Pyramid. (Cole, 1996, based upon Engeström, 1987)

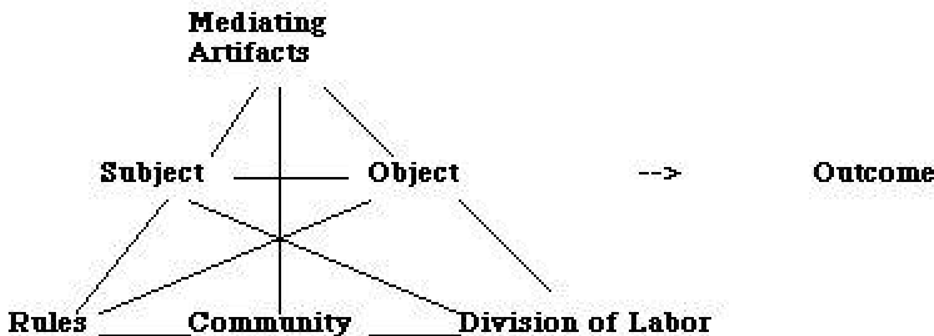
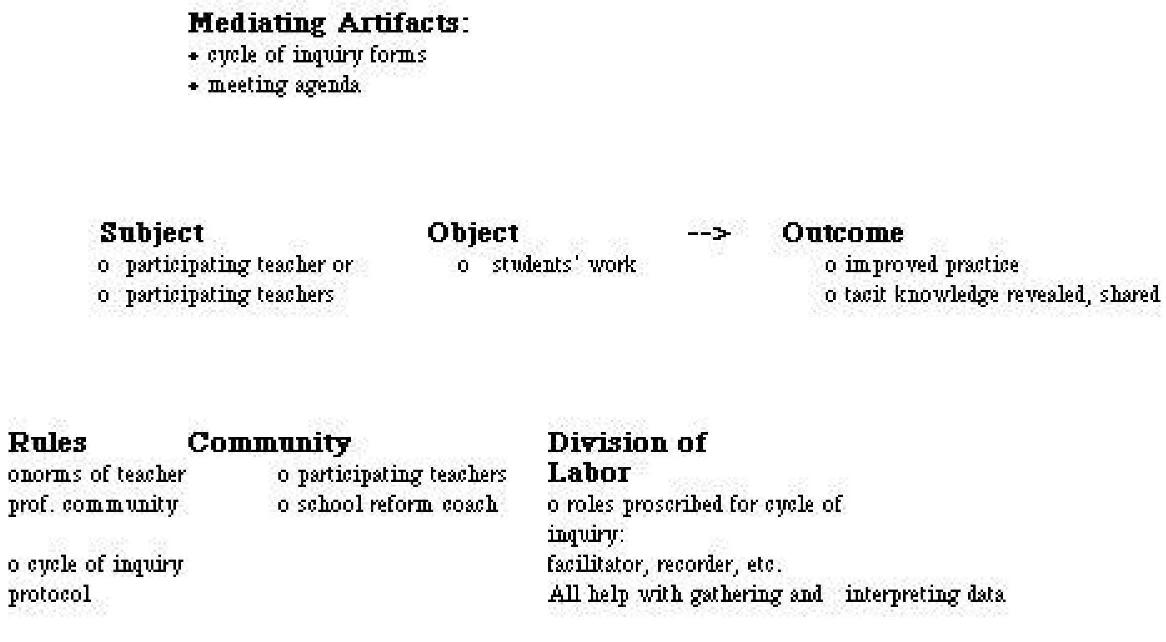


Figure Two: My own effort to illustrate application of this tool to joint work.
Imagine weekly after school meetings among 8 math teachers examining student work with the help of cycle of inquiry protocols and support of a school reform coach.



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flux to allow such a diagram to neatly capture what goes on when human beings work and learn together. On the other hand, as a kind of heuristic, the diagram can give us some

categories and sets of interrelationships to suggest what matters within specific collaborative activities.

Figure two illustrates how the categories used in activity theory might be relevant for an example of joint work teachers do together using cycle of inquiry protocols. To create this hypothetical example, I have intentionally chosen a very formal kind of collaboration, cycle of inquiry work, since its rules and tools are fairly standardized and formal, and thus need not be built from ethnographic data. A reader may already know of the kinds of protocols and forms that would guide this work, or could at least imagine them. This triangle can also be used for more informal collaborative activity, such as a teachers' book club. In collaboration that is less externally structured, an ethnographer would need to uncover tacit and informally negotiated norms and the most salient mediating artifacts, which are as likely to be in people's heads as they are to be in the world. Engeström foresees that artifacts can include "internal tools", which are concepts or understandings generated by a group that mediate what they do. He also finds that rules could also include informal norms. Thus, informal as well as formal and externally controlled activity structures can be understood as a collection of components which are meaningfully related to one another.

One could see teachers' professional development work together and classroom practice as two linked activity structures. Engeström's triangle and the larger theory help envision how various components of these activity structures are related to one another, and where contradictions or tensions may occur. There may be contradictions in various places:

- within one element (ex from figure two: cycle of inquiry protocols may contain internal contradictions or may conflict with local norms of teacher professional community);
- between elements (for example, a tension between existing norms of non-interference and an artifact like a written protocol requiring each teacher to provide constructive criticism regarding peers' work);
- and between adjacent activity structures (teachers' joint work in a cycle of inquiry group and their classroom practice are examples of adjacent activity systems; artifacts, or new roles—divisions of labor—from one could appear in the other).
- Also, activity theory can help us focus on how changing one or more elements of an activity structure will affect the others (Engeström, 1993). Changing a member of the "community" involved, a norm, or creating a new artifact may cause a dynamic response in other aspects of the triangle, whether this response produces change or to maintaining the status quo.

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