

Using activity theory: experiences of organizational authorship

This special issue addresses the relationship between people and work organizations in uncertain and unstable situations in which organizational practitioners are required to deal with and manage complexity and change. Practitioners are asked to work and learn in globalizing contexts in which work processes, skills and conditions of employment are quickly shifting and often contingent or precarious. Competences of the actors are often judged on their ability to respond to and manage events and issues that seem to be unusual and unsolvable on the basis of the existing knowledge. Becoming creative producers of knowledge and choices, capable of critically dialoguing with the past and the future, requires new instruments and forms of collaboration that mediate between the actors and the often unpredictable objects of their activity.

New dynamic balances have to be found between material and immaterial dimensions of the work, between stability and mobility and between standardization and differentiation. When changes seem to be out of control, alienation and withdrawal become a growing risk. The challenge is to stay active, not stopping the search for meanings and for sustainable courses of action. This means that it is crucial for the practitioners to become authors of their work, their professional lives and their organizations, that is, to create a sense of identity and to rediscover passion and pleasure for work.

Authorship is a way of being, relating and dwelling in professional and organizational communities (Gorli *et al.*, 2015). It means grasping and creating a shared sense of self and of the organizational landscapes as products of discourses and material practices. This implies transformative agency, breaking out of paralyzing conflicts by means of volitional productive actions that generate ethical and aesthetical relationships with work and professional objects (Sannino, 2015). This kind of authorship is a way of expanding the horizon of possibilities. Building this kind of authorship and transformative agency is perhaps the most important learning challenge of our time.

Cultural-historical activity theory offers a perspective through which authorship and transformative agency can be promoted and developed in organizations (Engeström *et al.*, 1999; Sannino *et al.*, 2009). Activity theory sees organizations as activity systems that change and develop through historically accumulated contradictions and expansive learning processes. Activity theory provides lenses and tools to detect and analyze contradictions, steps in expansive learning cycles, conceptualizations of expanded objects of activity and potentials of novel mediating instruments and patterns of interaction. The theory of expansive learning (Engeström, 2015) represents a powerful framework with which practitioners and researchers may collectively question their everyday practices, find new ways of acting in their organizations and manage contradictions in their activity systems.

The purpose of this special issue is to bring together recent advances in the use of activity theory in studies of workplace learning and organizational change. The articles represent research on workplace learning in two cultural contexts, namely, Finland and Italy. The traditions and conditions of these two cultures are sufficiently different to generate productive comparisons and exchanges, yet sufficiently similar to allow for fruitful collaboration and creative blending of perspectives. Interestingly enough, the

Finnish contributions come from the discipline of education, whereas the Italian contributions come from organization studies, sociology and psychology. Both traditions of research have systematically pursued collaboration with and interventions in work practices and workplace learning (Engeström, 2005; Ivaldi *et al.*, 2015; Ripamonti *et al.*, 2016).

The articles of the special issue explore and develop three important aspects of activity theory. Taken together, these three aspects depict an approach in movement, constructing its own zones of proximal development through practice-oriented research that supports practitioners struggling to gain authorship in their work activities.

The first aspect of activity theory is that of the potential of new mediational instruments and forms of collaboration. This is a central theme in the first two articles of the special issue. The paper of Cristina Zucchermaglio and Francesca Alby analyzes the organization of storytelling and its role in creating and sharing practical knowledge for cancer diagnosis. It highlights three main functions that storytelling practices play in supporting collaborative diagnostic work:

- (1) providing a guide for diagnostic action;
- (2) helping practitioners to manage contradictory evidence in the diagnosis; and
- (3) suggesting experience-based theories for dealing with more general situations.

Sharing and jointly theorizing about their practice and their past experiences, doctors cope with the contradictions, conflicting evidence and uncertainties inherent to their diagnostic work in a way that takes into account local constraints, different kinds of knowledge and limits in what they can know. Watching and discussing video-recordings and transcripts of their diagnostic work and communicative practices, the participants learn through collective efforts around a common object.

The article of Anu Kajamaa and Päivikki Lahtinen develops a conceptual model of carnivalization as a mode of collaborative interaction in home care. Carnivalization emerges when the standard script falls apart and the actors start to construct unexpected meanings for the activity and create innovative solutions for their conflict of motives. The key features of carnivalization involve multiple chronotopes and intertwining of seemingly disconnected objects of collaboration. The findings indicate that carnivalization can enhance a new type of client-service provider collaboration, especially significant for transforming an activity in which a historically established, stabilized script dominates the interaction.

The second aspect of activity theory elaborated on in the articles is that of expansive learning as a framework for examining organizational changes and transformative learning processes. This is the focus of the third article of the special issue. The paper of Silvio Ripamonti analyzes the process of expansive learning and development following the introduction of enterprise resource planning systems in the human resources department of a multinational pharmaceutical company. In this case, people undergo a top-down technological transformation, with strong implications on daily workplace experience. The paper shows how the process of expansive learning can meet turbulence and obstacles, even the closure of a Change Laboratory intervention process. The work to detect and clarify contradictions conveys the possibility to achieve a more articulated awareness of the practitioners' system of activity and of the possibilities to deal with it in a more sustainable way.

The third aspect of activity theory discussed in this issue concerns the perspective of formative interventions in organizations and workplaces (Engeström *et al.*, 2014). In formative interventions such as the Change Laboratory, the researchers collaborate closely with the practitioners to understand and build common interpretations of the activity system in relation to possible future-building actions of expansive learning. The tools and consequences of formative interventions are discussed in the last two articles of this issue. The paper of Silvia Ivaldi and Giuseppe Scaratti addresses the challenges related to reconfigurations of workplaces and organizations coping with increasingly complex and unpredictable environments. The authors discuss the dialectical concept of “germ cell” as a pivotal resource in the promotion of knowledge sharing, learning and organizational transformation. The paper presents two formative interventions in organizations riddled by complex and unsettled problems, focusing on the construction of germ cells as generative core of transformation and learning. The process of formation of a germ cell entails the ability to create real critical encounters with people, shaping conditions through which they become active authors of events and enhance their volition and practice to break and transform the status quo.

Finally, the article of Annalisa Sannino, Yrjö Engeström and Johanna Lahikainen examines organizational authoring understood as a longitudinal, material and dialectical process of transformation efforts by practitioners in a university library. The article asks to what extent a Change Laboratory intervention can help practitioners author their own learning. It examines how local efforts at expansive learning survive when a workplace undergoes large-scale organizational transformations. The analysis shows that the idea of “knotworking” constructed in the Change Laboratory became a germ cell that generates novel solutions in the library activity. The dialectical tension between the local and global change efforts became a source of productive movement driven by the emerging expanded object. The practitioners are modeling their own collective future competences, expanding them both in socio-spatial scope and in interactive depth.

The five articles move from detailed analyses of spatially and temporally compact face-to-face interactions toward processes and contexts extended and distributed in space and time. The articles also move from emphasis on the power and potential of language toward the power of material objects, artifacts and practices. Finally, the articles move from primarily observational analyses toward analyses of interventions and their long-term consequences. All the articles share a keen interest in contradictions and in the possibilities of gaining authorship by seeing and grasping contradictions in activity.

Yrjö Engeström

CRADLE, University of Helsinki, Finland, and

Giuseppe Scaratti

Faculty of Economics, Catholic University, Milan, Italy

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