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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

CALL: A triangle of triangles

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Abstract

Institutional investment in technology and infrastructure for the provision of new online and self-access language learning opportunities is not always accompanied by the necessary changes in the practices of learners, practitioners and managers in higher education (Wertsch, 2002). As a result, feelings of frustration, helplessness and confusion in individuals can begin to emerge soon after the initial excitement and novelty wear off. A large investment project that has little or no overall impact may give rise to questions about the adequate use of resources and ultimately lead to abandoning, discontinuing or replacing the project.

What lies at the root of failures to implement CALL institutionally? How can new practices emerge from existing ones? To explore these questions, in this paper we describe a project based on the assumption that the proposed CALL triangle consisting of the student, the teacher and the institution should be seen as a triangle of triangles, that is, the combination of three separate triangles, each one representing the specific activity system of the student, the teacher and the institution. The rationale is that these activities have different objects and motives as well as their own inner contradictions manifested in various ways.

Building upon activity theory (Leontiev, 1978; Vygotsky 1987; Engeström, 1987) and expansive learning theory (Engeström, 1987) principles, the authors advocate the Change Laboratory methodology developed at *CRADLE* (University of Helsinki's *Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning*) to bridge gaps between the three activities of the student, the teacher and the institution by finding a shared object, building a common zone of proximal development and creating the necessary tools that could lead to the formation of a new collective activity.

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Keywords: CALL; activity theory; theory of expansive learning; interventions; zone of proximal development

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1. Introduction

In 2007-2008 the *University of Guanajuato* (Mexico) opened 10 new self-access language centres at various sites, years after opening its first (and to that date only) self-access centre in 1994. Such a significant investment, however, was not sufficiently informed by knowledge about learner and practitioner experiences and preferences regarding (self-access) language learning within the institution, as is often the case elsewhere (Benson, 2001). What is more, the potential for new learning opportunities was not accompanied by the necessary changes in the practices of learners, practitioners and managers (Wertsch, 2002). This paper describes a project that aims to address this issue.

A number of ongoing research efforts and projects (e.g., Montoro and Hampel, 2011) have been trying to follow the increasing number of changes taking place within the institution affecting technology-mediated and non-technology-mediated language teaching and learning provision and to trace cultural-historical patterns. In a recent development, the institution's management has granted approval to conduct a project to create and launch a new languages programme using the Change Laboratory methodology.

2. Method

The proposed Change Laboratory methodology is a toolkit for interventions developed at the University of Helsinki's *CRADLE* (*Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning*) over the last few years. As reported by Engeström, Virkkunen, Helle, Pihlaja and Poikela (1996), the Change Laboratory cycle typically involves 6-12 weekly meetings of a representative workgroup within an organization and one or two follow-up meetings several months later. The aim is "to accelerate and intensify the expansive learning process by introducing successive tasks that require specific expansive learning actions" (Engeström and Sannino, 2010, p. 12).

Video and documentary data has been and will continue to be collected to characterise the three different activity systems (learning, teaching and institutional) by means of the activity system triangles (Engeström, 1987). The concept of disturbances - "deviations from the normal scripted course of events" (Engeström and Sannino, 2011, p. 372) - will be used as an intermediary analytical tool and an entry point to possible deep-seated systemic contradictions that may hold the key to locate a zone of proximal development (Engeström, 1987, p. 174) and thus unlock the emergence of a new type of activity where the three actors (teachers, learners and the institution) share a common overall objective.

3. Discussion

A number of opportunities and challenges arise along with this new project. Some of them are inherent to the complex nature and the stage of development of activity theory and the theory of expansive learning. The unstable and unpredictable features of the object of study (i.e., the emergent new shared activity) is enticing and daunting in equal measures. The lack of studies that have been conducted combining the Change Laboratory methodology and CALL leaves us only with references pertaining to other disciplines of research. Admittedly, an ever-increasing number of researchers have combined activity theory and language education (Blin, 2004; Lim and Hang, 2003; Tolmie and Boyle, 2000; Shulze, 2003; Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001), but operationalizing activity-theoretical concepts remains a significant challenge for researchers, as Mwanza (2002) has made abundantly clear.

4. Conclusions

Any new curriculum development project needs to be grounded in informed decisions and a principled approach. The sheer complexity of organisations and teaching and learning practices today calls for a solid theoretical basis and a sustainable application of the theory. We think that the Change Laboratory methodology combines the power of theory with the tools to change practice by means of a participant-led intervention that can live up to what is expected of a new languages programme.

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