THEORETICAL APPROACH TO DEVELOPING NEW PEDAGOGIES - ACTIVITY THEORY & TEACHER EDUCATION

Dr. Balkrishna Shripad Bhave,

Asst. Professor,

Kasturbai College of Education

Ashok Chowk, SOLAPUR - 413 001.

Introduction :

Activity theory is one of a family of related theoretical perspectives arising initially from the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986). These perspectives provide a framework for considering social and cultural practices: both how individuals learn by engaging in these practices and how mediational 'tools' such as language shape human activity. The activity theory focuses on *collective* social practices (such as work-places) and considers the complexity of real-life activity. It also emphasises 'action or intervention in order to develop practice and the sites of practice' (Edwards and Daniels, 2004:108).

This article briefly outlines the the work of Engeström, one of the key figures in the development of activity theory. It discusses the theory in context of teacher education & how the methodology can be applied in practice.

Activity Theory :

Activity theory presents a collection of basic ideas for conceptualizing both individual and collective practices as developmental processes of the context in which human activities normally takes place. The idea of studying human activities as developmental processes is crucial for identifying changes and contradictions that exist in an activity. Therefore, contradictions serve as the means by which new knowledge about the activity being examined emerges.

The *subject* of an activity system is the person, or group of people whose perspective is the focus of the analysis e.g. a teacher or a group of pupils.

The *object* is the goal or motive of the activity system as a whole (not necessarily that of individual members), e.g. improving pupil outcomes. Both *subject* and *object* are influenced by mediating *tools* the nature of the *community* to which the activity system belongs, the *rules* of normal behaviour appropriate to the system and the *division of labour* within the system. The term

division of labour relates to Marxist analysis of social relations and can refer both to hierarchical power structures within the system, and also to the way in which labour is divided within the context of the system. In other words, rules and the division of labor define how participants are expected to behave and who is expected to do what in the achievement of the object of an activity system (Tsui & Law, 2007: 1291).

So for example, a class teacher (*subject*) wishing to improve pupils' achievement (*object*) within a particular school (*community*) might want to introduce a new strategy for learning (*tool*). Depending on the management structure within the school (*division of labour*), the teacher may be constrained on the basis that the new idea is seen as deviating from implicit norms (*rules*), or encouraged if the attitude within the school is to support innovation - also an implicit *rule*. Activity systems do not remain static, and the elements within a system may change places over time. Thus in the example above, if the new strategy for learning is shown to be successful, it may be adopted by other teachers and its implementation may become a *rule* for within the school.

The interplay between the elements of an activity system or between different systems can provide opportunities for new learning, and for change. Engeström argues that the constant change and movement within systems acts as a vehicle to bring about 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 1999). The analysis of 'contradictions' within activity systems, and in adjoining clusters of activity systems is seen as a potential source of learning (Avis, 2009). Contradictory perspectives can arise in relation to the *object of* an activity system, resulting in different interpretations of the other components of the system (such as the tools, rules etc.):

One of the insights that a activity theory perspective affords is the analysis of multiple motives working on the same object and distinguishing a diversity of motives among those (collectively) in the subject position (Ellis et al., 2011:18). As contradictions and changes within the activity system become increasingly disruptive and challenging for participants, they reflect critically on the situation and begin to look for new solutions. Current assumptions and norms can be challenged and changed through this transformational process. However, this is not an inevitable process, and contradictions within activity systems may persist because they are not fully recognised. Using the activity theory framework for analysis enables researchers to identify these contradictions and to suggest possibilities for expansive learning as a result.

Conclusion :

As with any theoretical framework, there are limitations to the ways in which activity theory can be applied. Activity theory focuses on specific and localized social practice, and not on 'society' as a whole. Both schools and colleges are also part of socio-political systems which are beyond the analytical scope of activity theory. Nevertheless, the activity theory has much to offer teacher education, both as a method of analysis and as a stimulus for change. It enables us to analyse educational activity in practice, to identify: who (subject) does what to whom/what (object), in what circumstances (rules, community, division of labour, where, when) and to see social situations in a new light. The insight provided by activity theory analysis offers opportunities for reflection on our own assumptions, and those of others, and thus stimulates new professional learning. Such new learning might also lead to a critical evaluation of current working and teaching practices, leading to recommendations for improvements or change.

References :

1. Avis, J. (2009) : Transformation or Transformism: Engeström's Version of Activity Theory? Educational Review.

2. Boag-Munroe, G. (2010) : Investigating teacher language a comparison of the relative strengths of Conversation Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis as methods in: V.

3. Boyd, P., Baker, L., Harris, K., Kynch, C. & McVittie, E. (2006) Working with Multiple Identities: supporting new teacher education tutors in Higher Education.

4. Hardman, J. 2005. Activity Theory as a framework for understanding teachers' perceptions of computer usage at a primary school level in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education* [Online]. 25 (4) pp258 – 265

5. Ellis, A. Edwards and P. Smagorinsky, (Eds) Cultural Historical Perspectives on Teacher Education and Development: Learning Teaching (London, Routledge).

6. Engestrom, Y. 2001. Expansive Learning at Work: toward and activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work* [Online].14 (1), pp 133-156.

7. Viv Wilson (2014) : Examining teacher education through cultural-historical activity theory Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal Copyright © 2014 University of Cumbria Vol 6 (1) pages 20-29 Canterbury Christ Church University