Activity Theory: Roots to Application

“We dance around the ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows.”

Robert Frost

Overview

Philosophical tension can be found at the heart of almost every major social debate. This tension is evident in the wide range of paradigms found in discussions about learning, a complex topic that “defies easy definition and simple theorizing” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 275). Rooted in the divergent epistemological beliefs of Aristotle’s empiricism and Plato’s rationalism, differing assumptions about the nature of learning fall along a continuum. On one end is the empirical perspective that knowledge is derived through experience and the senses. On the other end is the rationalist view that the reasoning mind is the source of knowledge (Ertmer & Newby, 1993).

Emerging from these dualistic epistemological beliefs, many theories have been developed to identify and explain the key factors and dynamics that predict learning. Well-known formal theories can be categorized as behaviorism, humanism, cognitivism, social cognitivism, and constructivism (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). A fifth category, connectivism, has started to emerge as a theory to describe learning in the digital age, although some argue that this new way of understanding the learning process has not yet achieved the status of a formal theory (Boitshwarelo, 2011).

It’s important to emphasize that the study of learning is complex. Theories intersect in a web-like fashion, individual distinctions can be very subtle, and the literature is inconsistent in regard to categorization, as well as the qualification of formal learning theories. In general, there is no definitive guide in these matters.
This paper will explore activity theory, which is “premised upon the belief that there is a dynamic interrelationship between consciousness (the mind) and activity…” (Boitshwarelo, 2011, p. 167). Activity theory, which is also referred to as situated cognition (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), is associated with constructivist theories, and more specifically, social-constructivist (Anderson & Dron, 2011). The basic tenets of constructivist theories include a wide range of perspectives that incorporate both empiricist and rationalist epistemologies. Constructivists believe “that the mind filters input from the world to produce its own reality” (Ertmer & Newby, 1993. p. 62).

Merriam, et al (2007) described the essence of constructivism as the view of learning as a “process of constructing meaning” (p. 291) and identified the belief that learning is always active as a common theme in all variations of constructivist theories.

**Contributors**

Constructivism is associated with several individual contributors. “Dewey (1916), Piaget (1973), Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996) each proposed that learners could learn actively and construct new knowledge based on their prior knowledge” (Huang, 2002, p. 28). Anderson and Dron (2011) indicated that Piaget’s work focused on construction of knowledge on a personal level. Constructivism that “acknowledged the social nature of knowledge and of its creation in the minds of individual learners” (p.82) is associated with Dewey and Vygotsky and often referred to as social constructivism.

The work of Vygotsky in the area of social constructivism is the foundation of activity theory.

**Major Principles**
Activity theory, originally developed from a conceptualization of social-constructivism, is founded on principles common to those theories. In describing commonalities of social-constructivist theories, Anderson and Dron (2011) identified the importance of:

- new knowledge as building upon the foundation of previous learning,
- context in shaping learners’ knowledge development,
- learning as an active rather than passive process,
- language and other social tools in constructing knowledge,
- metacognition and evaluation as a means to develop learners’ capacity to assess their own learning,
- learning environment as learner-centered and stressing the importance of multiple perspectives,
- knowledge needing to be subject to social discussion, validation, and application in real world contexts (p. 82).

Specifically, activity theory (AT) involves a subject (the learner), an object (the task or activity), and mediating artifacts (literature, laws, computer, etc.) (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). “According to AT, human learning is fundamentally grounded in activity” (Boitshwarelo, 2011, p. 167).

**Application**

Merriam et al. (2007) applied situated cognition (a term they used interchangeably with activity theory) to the concept of communities of practice found in adult learning. Barab and Duffy (2012) explained that “we are dealing with evolving concepts – and people use new terms to include and extend old ones” (p. 29). They identified situated
cognition as a synonym to their preferred term, situativity theory, and discussed communities of practice as a learning activity based on situativity theory. Considering this, I believe that activity theory and situativity theory are synonymous, or just a few minor modifications apart, and communities of practice as described by Barab and Duffy (2012) is a practical application of activity theory.

“Roughly, a community of practice involves a collection of individuals sharing mutually-defined practices, beliefs, and understandings over an extended time frame in the pursuit of a shared enterprise” (Barab & Duffy, 2012, p. 40). Consistent with the basic premise of activity theory, in a community of practice the subject (learner) engages with the object (community or professional activity) through mediating artifacts (professional organizations, literature, communication channels, etc.) to result in the desired learning outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Activity theory is just one of many theories that have been developed from the constructivist perspective of how learning is achieved. And the constructivist perspective is just one of the orientations that span the epistemological continuum. The diversity of thought that has been traced to the ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato continues today.

Behaviorists are advocates of the empiricist view, articulated by Aristotle. Cognitivists are advocates of the rational view, articulated by Plato. Constructivists, humanists, and connectivists bridge these paradigms in countless different dimensions. While differing, each of these offers value in its own way and in its proper place.
References


