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Russian Activity Theory

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Russian Activity Theory

Abstract
Activity theory was developed out of L. S. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory by one of his two main collaborators, A. N. Leont’ev, beginning in the late 1930s. It has evolved into a major direction in Russian social psychology and now has adherents worldwide, influencing studies in education, language socialization, computer interface design, and expert work, among others. (It is not to be confused with the classroom Activity Approach of the Deweyan progressives in the United States.)

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Rogerian argument is perhaps best seen not as a persuasive strategy, but as an invention heuristic that encourages writers to begin by imagining the world as others see it (Brent, "Rogerian Rhetoric"). Rogerian rhetoric may have retained its appeal in composition studies not so much because it helps students win arguments as because it may help them grow into more tolerant, more inclusive, and more dialogic human beings.

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Primary Texts

Major Scholarship in Composition

Textbooks Incorporating Rogerian Rhetoric

RUSSIAN ACTIVITY THEORY

Summary
Activity theory was developed out of L. S. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory by one of his two main collaborators, A. N. Leont’ev, beginning in the late
1930s. It has evolved into a major direction in Russian social psychology and now has adherents worldwide, influencing studies in education, language socialization, computer interface design, and expert work, among others. (It is not to be confused with the classroom Activity Approach of the Deweyan progressives in the United States.)

Activity theory embraces many versions. Here I summarize Leont’ev’s version, as developed by Engeström. This version explains human behavior, including writing, through three levels or lenses: activity system, action, and operation.

First, the activity system is the basic unit of analysis for both groups’ and individuals’ behavior. An activity system is any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction: a family, a religious organization, an advocacy group, a political movement, a course of study, a school, a discipline, a research laboratory, a profession, and so on. These activity systems are mutually (re)constructed by participants using certain material tools in certain ways and not others, including discursive tools such as speech sounds and inscriptions (speaking and listening, reading and writing).

An activity system might be thought of as a triangle with three interacting constituents. Activity theory analyzes the way (1) some subject—individual or collective—uses (2) concrete tools (including the inscriptions called writing) to pursue (3) an object and a motive.

Tools are material objects in use by some individual or group for some object/motive; that is, tools-in-use. The uses of a single material thing may differ over time and across different activity systems.

The object/motive refers to the “raw material” upon which the subject(s) brings to bear various tools, the “object of study” of some discipline, for example (e.g., cells in cytology, literary works in literary criticism) and the direction of that activity, its purpose (e.g., analyzing cells, analyzing literary works). That is, the object of an activity system also incorporates an objective, a motive.

An activity system (and human behavior generally) must be understood historically. The identity of the subjects, the purpose (object/motive) of their actions, and their tools-in-use are historically (re)constructed over time. Like other species, humans act purposefully and have biological motives for their activity. But human behavior may differ radically among groups. The use of tools (including vocalizing and marking) and—most importantly—the division of labor that tools allow mediates humans’ interactions, separating the biological motive from the object of activity. With the division of labor, a range of ongoing activity systems arises. The use of tools mediates the activity in specific and objective ways that are realized historically, through a developing cooperation and/or competition (division of labor) in the use of tools.

Contradictions in people’s objects and motives arise as activity systems stretch out in space and time, multiplying through the division of labor to become large, powerful, and immensely varied—as their histories unfold variously and dynam-
ically. These deep contradictions are played out in changing power relations among individuals and groups, which can be analyzed at both the micro and macro levels by tracing the variable uses of discursive and other tools to mediate the contradictions and transform activity systems. For example, students doing an internship may find it extremely difficult or even troubling to write on the job, because they feel the contradiction between school writing, with the object/motive of a grade, and writing for an organization with another object/motive, where the relations with others mediated by writing are longer-term and the stakes are higher (Winsor; Dias et al.).

Second, specific, time-bound actions make up activity systems. Subjects take specific actions that are directed toward specific goals, which realize the ongoing object/motive of a collective activity system. These actions are usually conscious.

Third, actions are realized through operations, specific ways of taking actions toward goals within certain conditions. Over time, an action may be operationalized as a routine way of accomplishing some goal and may become unconscious—until conditions change. For example, the first time one uses an automobile stick shift, it is a conscious action, but with repeated use the action becomes a routine operation, which will remain unconscious until conditions change (e.g., driving a vehicle with a different shift pattern). Similarly, learning to write involves a range of actions that may be operationalized in various activity systems as conventions and genres of discourse. However, operations may be appropriated from one activity system to another (e.g., beginning sentences with a capital letter).

Reception and Significance in Composition Studies

Activity theory, as a distinct branch of Vygotskian theory, has only recently begun to influence composition studies. It has been most widely used in research on the acquisition of disciplinary discourses, with attendant issues of identity and authority (e.g., Dias et al.; Prior). These uses have come mainly through its intersection with North American genre theory, where genres are seen as dynamic, local realizations of specific social purposes of intersecting groups (re)negotiating power. And it has been used to explain the micro-level relations between institutions of schooling and the macro-level social practices (activity systems) with which classrooms and curricula interact (e.g., Russell).

The growing significance of activity theory in composition studies lies in its ability to analyze the dynamic social interactions mediated by writing at both the micro level (psychological and interpersonal) and the macro level (sociological or cultural). Writing is seen as one material tool among many through which identity, authority, and power relations are (re)negotiated. Concepts of “discourse community” and Bakhtinian “dialogism” are thus broadened and the gaps between the analysis of individual and social behavior—as well as gaps between the behavior of various groups—can be bridged in an overarching theory.
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Primary Texts


Major Scholarship in Composition


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