ARENA OF CRISIS

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Solidarity and Community: Collaborative Learning in Times of Crisis

John Cripps Clark[1] · Brendan Jacobs[2] · Judith MacCallum[3]

Abstract

In his writing on pedology from 1928 to 1931, Vygotsky (1998) discusses how the social environment provides the context and source for human development. During the almost century since, Vygotsky's ideas have developed to inform our understanding of groups and institutions through Cultural Historical Activity Theory. In this paper we examine the evolution of social structures which have guided development for a community of Vygotskian scholars in the Asia Pacific region over the past two decades and how it has responded to the present crisis. In this time of crisis, where the movement has been from face-to-face to online interaction, our experience of moving between intermittent online to sustained face-to-face meeting, refracted through our understandings of Vygotsky, can inform not only present experience but also help us to think about what new structures and relationships can be created as we move beyond crisis.

Keywords Activity theory · Cultural historical activity theory · Dual-stimulation method · Sociocultural activity theory · Vygotsky

Introduction

In our present turmoil it is apposite to look to past times of crisis. The great Russian psychologist and educator, Lev Vygotsky, lived in such a time as Hyman (2012) and others have observed. After the First World War, Russian Revolution, Russian Civil War, world economic collapse, collectivisation, and forced industrialisation, many soviet intellectuals believed that the whole world was in crisis. Added to this, between November 1925 and May 1926, Vygotsky wrote *The Historical Meaning in the Crisis in Psychology* (Vygotsky 1997a) while hospitalised with the tuberculosis that killed him 9 years later. In the next

✉ Brendan Jacobs
  b.jacobs@cqu.edu.au

[1] Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

[2] CQUniversity, Rockhampton, Australia

[3] Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

9 years in collaboration with his colleagues, Vygotsky forged a new way of thinking that evolved into what today we label "Cultural Historical Activity Theory" (CHAT).

CHAT as a framework for systematically analysing human activities in context is "a powerful analytic tool that helps to reveal the fundamental aspects of social practice, and support structured, meaningful interpretations of empirical data" (Kaptelinin and Miettinen 2005). It was developed within the Moscow school of cultural-historical psychology in Soviet Russia, notably by Vygotsky and Leont'ev, between the 1920s and 1970s before moving to the west and being further developed by social researchers, including Yrjo Engeström. Within the theory, activity is framed as intentional, object orientated, and directed towards creation of outcomes (physical or mental). Mental activity does not prefigure physical activity, but the physical and mental are inextricably bound to each other (Leont'ev 1981). Thus, knowing can only be understood in the context of doing; "you are what you do" (Vygotsky 1978) and vice versa. The great utility of CHAT is that it is a realist theory that enables systematic analysis of social activity in context. It highlights the most important factors that affect the activity and provides a language with which to analyse them.

Our CHAT reading group has been meeting monthly to discuss a distributed paper since 2000. Over the two decades it has grown from a handful of members to over a hundred, mainly in Australia and New Zealand but extending across the Asia Pacific region. Each month a paper is distributed among members and a time set for discussion of the paper (usually between 4 and 5 pm so schoolteachers could attend after work). Although only a minority of members are able to attend the meetings regularly, many members read the papers. The papers are chosen discursively to cover a range of theoretical and empirical topics but anchored in CHAT and usually relevant to the discipline of Education. From the start attendance was primarily online using, initially, a precarious mix of telephone and primitive videoconferencing but gradually evolving to more stable video platforms. Increasingly, the authors of the papers have been regularly invited while retaining the focus on the group discussion of the artefact of the research paper. More recently, a 5-day, annual residential Summer School has been held as an opportunity for participants to engage in sustained discussion and debate around Vygotsky's ideas.

This paper recounts a longitudinal reflection of how our practice has become theoretically informed *praxis*, both individually and collaboratively amongst the participants. A theme which has emerged is that many of Vygotsky's constructs are *generative* and the evolution of these ideas continues to bring fresh perspectives to the current crisis.

This paper is a collaboration between the co-convenors of the Sociocultural Activity Theory (SAT) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Australian Association of Research in Education (AARE). The authors are also closely involved in the International Society of Cultural-historical Activity Research (https://www.iscar.org/) which is the umbrella organisation for Cultural Historical, Sociocultural, Activity Theory and Cultural Historical Activity Theory researchers. *The Psychology of Global Crises* conference in 2020 became a catalyst for us to publish the ideas contained herein but the genesis of the community described here goes back 20 years. This paper does not present empirical research but, as researchers and academics, our collective reflections and experiences offer some theoretical and methodological insights into how this CHAT community has continued to function and even flourish throughout these uncertain times.

The commonality between CHAT and SAT is Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934). The differences are regional, historical, and theoretical, but for the purposes of this paper we will often simply refer to CHAT, which grew out of Vygotsky's work with his colleagues A. R. Luria and A. N. Leont'ev.

One of Vygotsky's most generative ideas was his understanding of *mediation* through the use of tools. CHAT models are based on Vygotsky's notion of tool mediation although Vygotsky never represented these diagrammatically (Fig. 1).

The idea of mediation…runs as the unifying and connecting lifeline throughout the works of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, Luria and the other representatives of the Soviet cultural-historical school (Engeström 1999).

The idea of mediation was used by Hegel in terms of ideas and by Marx in terms of objects, "Man uses the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of objects so as to make them act as forces that affect other objects in order to fulfil his personal goals" (cited in Vygotsky 1978). Vygotsky combined these two aspects of mediation as "Mediators are understood to be twin entities that have both material and ideal properties simultaneously" (Zinchenko 2001).

A fundamental assumption of Activity Theory is that tools mediate or alter the nature of human activity and, when internalised, influence humans' mental development. (Jonassan and Rohrer-Murphey 1999).

Vygotsky's notion of mediation is also evident in the dual stimulation method developed by Vygotsky and Sakharov (Vygotsky 1931/1994). The various participants in the CHAT reading group continue to engage in collaborative learning because they meet to discuss the same paper *together*. The theoretical and methodological issues pertaining to each paper often require the participants to modify their thinking which is an ongoing process characteristic of both problem solving and concept formation. Vygotsky said that the dual stimulation method is useful when people are "faced with a task that can only be resolved through the formation of concepts" (Vygotsky 1987) and that "the path through which the task is resolved in the experiment corresponds with the actual process of concept formation" (Vygotsky 1987).

The Dual Stimulation Method

Daniels (2012) has defined Vygotsky and Sakharov's dual stimulation method as an experimental approach where people are placed in a situation where "a problem is identified and they are also provided with tools with which to solve the problem or means by which they can construct tools to solve the problem" (p. 822). The first stimulus (i.e. problem) and the second stimulus (i.e. tools) are predetermined and so the point of this method is to understand the effect of the second stimulus on the first. According to Giest (2008), the cornerstone of the dual stimulation method is to investigate "human

Fig. 1 Tools mediate between subject and object (Based on Vygotsky 1978)

Tools

Subject ⟷ Object
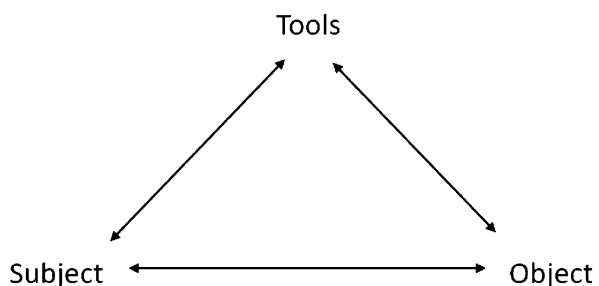
psychological functions in the process of their development by creating the conditions that mainly cause the development" (p. 103).

Of the three communities described in this paper, perhaps the CHAT reading group best illustrates how dual stimulation has been used to facilitate learning. For the participants in this group, the first stimulus is the broad but enduring desire to extend their academic interests as lifelong learners in general, focussing on Vygotsky's theories. The second stimulus for this group is the monthly reading which the group discusses. It is emailed out several weeks prior to the meetings. Using the flipped classroom model, participants engage with the reading prior to the meeting and discuss areas of interest with the group during the meeting. According to Wertsch (1991), Vygotsky's criterial interest when using the dual stimulation method was always on the second stimulus. So too with the reading group, it is always the reading itself which occasions the discussion and learning.

Anning, Cullen and Fleer (2009) have described CHAT as an "umbrella methodology" (p. 1) that has evolved from Vygotsky and Sakharov's dual stimulation method. The exact course of this evolution has not been without controversy, particularly in relation to the myriad of diagrams first proposed by Engeström (1987) to conceptualise the dynamics of activity. Engeström conceptualised CHAT with a focus on knowledge creation stating that, "the object of activity is a moving target" (Engeström 2001). The fluidity of Engeström's notion of activity has led others such as Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola and Lehtinen (2004) to state that "processes of knowledge creation are intertwined and co-evolve with human practical activities" (p. 119). The contention around Engeström's activity triangle is that it has taken Vygotsky's ideas around mediation further than Vygotsky himself might have intended but the inherent utility of the model is that various researchers can add their own variables into the triangle to articulate their unique theoretical framework. Accordingly, Fig. 2 shows how the various categories of Engeström's second generation activity triangle have been adapted to show some of the dynamics involved in the various communities described in this paper:

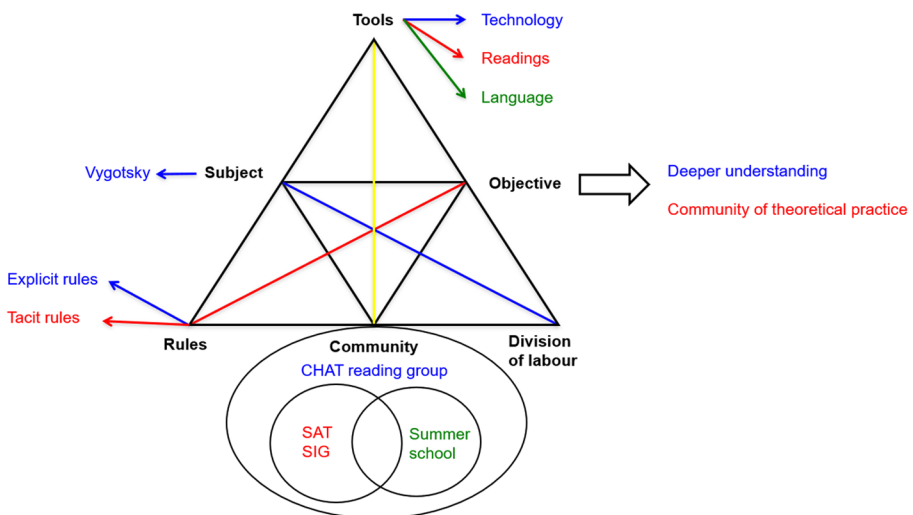The major categories within Fig. 2 will now be discussed in turn:

Fig. 2 A synthesis model for activity

Subject

Although Vygotsky is central to the theoretical interests of our community, it should be noted that the participants do not deify Vygotsky as being infallible but, rather, see him as an insightful figure whose short but influential life and work continues to warrant further investigation and reflection.

Objective

The group has always shared a need to engage deeply with the ideas of Vygotsky and cultural-historical activity theory. The learning associated with this is informal as it does not count towards any official academic qualification. However, many PhD students have found this to be an invaluable resource as they can discuss theory and practice with like-minded academics. All who participate in the discussion benefit in some way as the age-old practice stated by Pliny the Younger goes, "He [/she] who does the talking does the learning" (Radice 1963).

Division of Labour

The three co-convenors of the SAT SIG share the responsibility for reviewing submissions for a SAT SIG symposium which occurs during the AARE annual conference. We then schedule the presentations into thematic blocks and also chair each session.

The Summer School has traditionally been held immediately after the AARE conferences. The SAT SIG co-convenors make all of the arrangements and bookings for this event, trying to keep costs down in view of the fact that many of the participants are self-funding their attendance. Guest speakers always add to the depth and quality of discussion at the Summer Schools. Any grant funding which the SAT SIG receives from the AARE is generally used towards the Summer School and guest speakers.

Choosing the readings, inviting guest authors, organising the meetings, and moderating discussion at the CHAT discussion group has been undertaken by John Cripps Clark due to his ongoing interest in this area. It is this interest which has become a shared, common interest amongst the members within the group. Perhaps it should be noted that there are no costs or fees involved in the CHAT discussion group. The group exists solely for the shared joy of deepening out theoretical understanding of SAT and CHAT.

Rules

There are no official or explicit rules that any of the participants must adhere to but it is interesting how the tacit rules associated with academic debate guide each person during their various interactions. What has become apparent more recently is that participants in the CHAT reading group often engage with the "chat" facility within Zoom to engage with each other through questions, comments, or even adding in references or files. This has proved to be quite useful as it breaks the traditional rules which are common in a face-to-face classroom where you would not want to interrupt the speaker unless an open discussion is underway. For example, participants use comments in the chat facility to spark other ideas, place a relevant reference, and so on. This demonstrates their engagement with the

topic at hand which is then used to extend and clarify the discussion by coming back into the verbal conversation or can continue and build as text. Both instances can be particularly useful as many of the participants are also writers who appreciate suggestions for relevant sources.

Tools

Tools are perhaps best understood according to their use. Kaufman (2008, as cited in Dron 2012) noted how a screwdriver can be used to remove the lid on a tin of paint, stir the paint, or even be used as a weapon or a myriad of other applications in addition to its original use to drive screws. Tools are more than an alternative pathway for activity as they can fundamentally change the activity. The subject is able to achieve different outcomes using a tool and in turn the subject is changed. "[Mediating tools] possess the specific function of reverse action, it transfers the psychological operation to higher and qualitatively new forms and permits the humans, by aid of extrinsic stimuli, *to control their behaviour from outside*" (Vygotsky 1978, emphasis added).

Tools can also be physical or psychological. The physical tools utilised within the CHAT reading group include the communication technologies, namely, telephone and video conferencing. The psychological tools include language, which according to Hasan and Kazlauskas (2014), is "the most significant tool for collaborative human activity" (p. 9). The reading is in PDF format but also an assemblage of ideas which channels the discussion and development of understandings.

Although the CHAT reading group uses video conferencing, these videos are not recorded. In part, this is because the learning which occurs is not part of any formal academic qualification so there is no onus on us to make the videos available. The group does not have a website either so there is no need to be archiving content. As such, the group is very much a lived experience as a *collective resource* rather than a collection of resources.

Community

Vygotsky's oft-quoted general genetic law of cultural development; "every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as a intramental category" (1997b) is also true of our own development as a community of practice. As with many groups built around scholarship, the CHAT reading group has been instrumental in bringing people together to create a community and social situation in which ideas are shared and developed. One of the participants at a recent CHAT reading group commented about how he had missed engaging with this type of literature. For him it was reminiscent of fond memories from his PhD when he was immersed in similar material.

Because the reading group sits independently of the normal organisational and power structures (unlike most reading groups it is not built around a scholar and his or her students or a research group) it subverts the contradiction between use and exchange value (for research papers the institutional points and citations it garners). Members' interests are primarily in understanding and using the paper to develop their own thinking and a community of scholarship. This understanding of the role of the reading group enables us to interpret the movement from reading group to SIG to Summer School.

Although the three communities have been described so far individually, they can be understood as a fluid community which meets in three different contexts. The CHAT reading group is at the heart of this community due to its genesis as the earliest community forming some 20 years ago. The three co-convenors of the SAT SIG all attend the monthly CHAT reading group and organise the Summer School, which although in its infancy, has been held annually until the disruption caused by COVID-19. Previous Summer Schools have also included online elements.

There is also a *WhatsApp* group formed by those who attended the last Summer School. As one member remarked "I'm grateful that we have technology so that we can stay connected". Members have shared times of contemplation on ideas discussed at the Summer School and recent readings. This is also a forum for questions about their own understanding of ideas or the source of particular Vygotskian ideas that were discussed previously. The strong connection between members has enabled sharing and support through words and feelings at times of personal and family crisis.

Crisis and Drama

How are we to understand the drama of our present crisis and the emotions, challenges and opportunities for our scholarly community?

The Hegelian idea of contradiction, which Marx and subsequently Vygotsky drew on, allows us to reflect on our present crisis: "A society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (Marx and Engles, 1978). It also allows us to see how it can generate, through synthesis, new ways of working and thinking.

In his analysis of the history and psychology of emotions Vygotsky (1999) frequently refers to crisis or drama in order to highlight the change from one period of cultural development to another. Change and transition create drama, and these dramatic moments, in turn, create conditions in which development can occur. Although the historical roots of our present crises are complex and convoluted, it is through understanding the subjectivities of these dramas that we can create new activity systems which respond to the contradictions rather than paper them over. The crisis has forced a movement away from face-to-face to online for most of us. It has been seamless for some and quite traumatic for others depending on their prior experiences with online learning and other factors which might also be impacting them such as social isolation.

The sense of community fostered amongst the group also extends beyond the university affiliation or geographic location of each participant. Many participants within the group have changed jobs or countries but the theoretical interest of the group has been a constant and even stabilising factor in such instances and the network of scholarship and support has extended across the world.

Conclusion

The present crisis is a health crisis but any crisis can be a stimulus to think and change the way that we do things. If this paper contributes anything it is about thinking about the relationships rather than the thing itself, not the online or the face-to-face communication; not the times we call stability or the times we call crisis, but it is the movement between those

things which needs to be the focus of our attention. Activity theory can contribute to our thinking because it gives us a tool for data collection and analysis which focuses on process over product.

Crisis has, at its heart, the idea of contradiction. A contradiction is not just something going wrong but it is an opportunity for change and development. It has often been said that nothing will be the same after COVID-19 but change will only be possible if we understand the fundamental contradictions that are occurring in the movement from pre-crisis to crisis and start to think about new activities and new ways of living and existing. Understanding and resolving these contradictions can move us from disruption to development.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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