The Phenomenological Experience of Activity: Toward a Diagrammatical Representation of a Fourth Generation?

Andrew Clapham
University of Nottingham UK

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the relationship between phenomenology, life-world and the experience of activity - I am interested in the formation and reformation of motives, needs and objectives. I draw upon my research experience to present a hypothesis where I suggest the possibility for inertness in Activity Theory analysis, perhaps resulting from a lack of focus upon this immediate experience of activity. I discuss multiple interlinked activities and poly-motives in relation to what might be the meaning of an activity to a participant. I focus upon the what-might-be in relation to the experience of activities. Consequently, I am interested in a possible reification of Activity Theory - I present a reformation of the Activity Theory triangle to what might be a visual representation of the relationships between the mediating components of activity in a temporal and spatial context.

Introduction

This paper has evolved out of my research relationship - that is, an exploration of two teachers experience of digital technology mediated activities in their day-to-day life-world working in a UK secondary school. I am interested in a synthesis of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (Husserl, 1935, , 1964, , 1967, , 1970, , 1992); the life-world of Alfred Schutz (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) my postmodernist epistemology, and a reflexive postmodern Activity Theory analysis located in the work of Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1977), Jacques Lacan (Lacan, 1992) and Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1979). As Bonnie Nardi and Victor Kaptelinin suggest, activity is the process of a subject’s ‘interaction’ (p.6) with the world (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Karri Kuutti describes Activity Theory as ‘a philosophical and cross-disciplinary
framework for studying different forms of human practices as developmental process, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time’ (p.25) (Kuutti, 1996) – she suggests that Activity Theory is neither a grand theory nor is it interested in general ‘activities’. It is this movement away from what might be the generic application of an Activity Theory analysis to utilising Activity Theory in exploring specifically the activities and experiences of research participants.

**Amending the model**

So, how might Activity Theory sit within my postmodernist phenomenological epistemology – how does this analytical tool relate to what I claim to know, and why I claim to know it. I am interested in what Mo Griffiths describes as the role of little stories (Griffiths, 2003) in illuminating social issues and processes – to investigate activity, it is important to be both reflective and reflexive of my own biases and presuppositions as to what activity is for me. To explore this personal meaning, the mediational components of activity appear prominent in Activity Theory analysis which as David Bakhurst indicates, have evolved from Alexei Leontev’s (Leontiev, 1978) exploration of the relationships between mediating artefacts, subject and object (Bakhurst, 2009). These components are represented in the third generation Activity Theory triangle shown in **Figure 1** a diagram which is perhaps associated with the work of Yrjö Engeström (Engeström, 1987, 1990, 1995, 1999, 2001, 2005; Engeström & Escalante, 1996).

![Figure 1](image_url) **Figure 1** The Generic relationship between Activity Theory mediating components.
It is my concern with possibilities as opposed to certainties, fluidity as opposed to structure which has led me to make some amendments to the naming of the mediating components, used in Activity Theory – amending subject to *participant*, object to *objective* and rules to *norms*, which can be seen in **Figure 2**.

![Amended Activity Theory mediating components](image)

**Figure 2** Amended Activity Theory mediating components

This amendment is not one of *process* more one of *meaning* and is part of a history of amending Activity Theory - see for example the work of Michael Scaife, John Halloran and Yvonne Rogers on *activity space* (Scaife, Halloran, & Rogers, 2002) and Bonnie Nardi and Victor Kaptelinin’s work on the *object of activity* (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

I have amended the mediating component of subject to participant to potentially counterpoint meanings regarding being subject, or subjected to, perhaps a deterministic world - the use of participant here is to indicate that rather than be a subject, I might be a participant in my own life-world and activities. Whereas this amendment of subject to participant might be located within philosophical and indeed ontological questions, amending object to objective is a process perhaps of clarification – it has to be remembered that Activity Theory has been translated from the Russian of its original language. Using objective instead of object is a means perhaps for understanding what activity itself might be - as Bonnie Nardi and Victor Kaptelinin (2006) suggests, ‘A way of understanding objects of activities is to think of them as objectives that give meaning to what people do’ (p.66). Objective might give some further clarity to the meaning of the participant objective relationship. Finally, it is this ‘understanding’
which leads me to amend rules to become social norms – that is that norms rather than being visible and explicit as rules might be, could instead be invisible and implicit, perhaps norms are less structural than rules – the use of norms might give the opportunity to also explore informal work practices.

The focus in this paper is upon the fluidity of Activity Theory analysis of life-world experience – it is this fluidity, which underpins the amendment of the triangle model I discuss later. To explore this possible shift in Activity Theory meaning it is necessary to discuss some technical parts of Activity Theory – that is intentionality, the participant-objective relationship, motives, needs and conflicts.

**Intentionality**

Intentionality is the directedness of experience - phenomenological experience is an experience of something just as activity is directed toward something. As Edmund Husserl suggests, ‘In perception something is perceived, in imagination something is imagined, in love something is loved, in hate hated, in desire, desired etc.’ (p.554)(Husserl, 1970). These comments appear to have a resonance with those of Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi (2006) who discuss Activity Theory’s emphasis upon people acting with tools - it is the experience of the activity, and the experience of the tool mediating the activity, which has a resonance with my analytical focus.

Intentionality focuses upon consciousness toward an object (or objective) - the act of consciousness is the consciousness of something and it is this, which gives intentionality. As Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi suggest, ‘Activity Theory distinguishes between people and things, allowing a discussion of human intentionality’ (p.10)(Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). It is both physical and mental things, which the intentionality of phenomenology and Activity Theory brings to the analysis. It is the emphasis upon the way a thought or desire is directed toward something, which brings intentionality and objective together – phenomenological experience appears to be consciousness-of-something. What may be central here is how this intentionality could be part of activity and underpins Activity Theory analysis. From a
phenomenological position action and meaning appear to be inseparable from each other. As David Woodruff Smith suggests,

> We say an experience is intentional, or directed (literally “aimed”) toward some object. We also say a mental state or act represents some object (an individual, an event, a state of affairs, or whatever), and so intentionality consists in this representational character. (Woodruff-Smith, 2007) (p.192)

Why intentionality appears of note here is this directedness of experience – Activity Theory analysis explores activities. What I am advocating is a possibility for a constant fluidity of a continuum between objectives and mediating components. It is this linkage between meaning, action and activity that appears to give intentionality a resonance in both phenomenology and Activity Theory.

**Participant – Objective**

If intentionality is the somethingness of experience, here I explore the relationship in Activity Theory between participant and objective. In Activity Theory an activity is directed toward an objective – the intentionality previously discussed - that without an objective an activity is non-objectified. Indeed, as Alexei Leontiev asserts, activity is not possible without an objective (Leontiev, 1978). Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi cite Alexei Leontiev’s (Leontiev, 1981) definition of the meaning of object,

> Accordingly, I will limit the meaning of ‘object’. Usually this concept has two meanings: in a broad sense, it is a thing related to other things, that is, a ‘thing having an existence’; in a more narrow sense, it is something that opposes, something that resists, something at which an action is directed, that is something to which a living creature is somehow related, as an object of his or her activity, no matter if this activity is an external one or an internal one (for example the object of eating, an object of labour, an object of contemplation, etc). From now on the term ‘object’ will be used in this more narrow, special meaning. (p.140)

What appears of substance here, is that the objectives of an activity are linked to what the outcome of the activity might be - it is the objective which motivates and co-ordinates the activity. However, the objective might transform in the process of doing the activity – objectives are not set, they are temporally and spatially reliant. For example, Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi (2006) indicate that objectives are ‘...constructed instantiated and linked to one another through relations of power and passion...’ (p.153). So, if exploring practice in terms of objectives does reveal some of the underlying issues of an activity might this be an
example of objectives becoming fluid and in constant formation and re-formation through the process of doing the activity itself?

As Karri Kuutti (1996) suggest, the process of doing an activity can change the objective of that activity - involvement in the activity may change the participants’ relationship to the objective with the objective only becoming apparent in the process of doing the activity. If objectives do underpin activities then the role of the tools, which mediate these activities, is part of the relationship between participant and objective. In Activity Theory there is a relationship between tool and participant. But what of the relationship between the participants and their objectives in this mediational relationship - mediation of the participants’ activities is through culturally designed and experienced tools; mediation of activity is developed through experience of activity in a setting. Therefore, is this discussion of objectives actually a discussion of culture and community?

It is through the mediating components of activity that day-to-day activities and life-world experiences are explored. What may be of substance here is that the objectives of activities appear to give meaning to my life-world – it is what underlies my activities. It is the relationship between the participant in an activity and the objective of that activity which might be highlighted here. As Yrjö Engeström and Virginia Escalante suggest, an activity is the most basic unit of analysis in Activity Theory and provides a way of considering the relationship between participant and objective (Engerstrom & Escalante, 1996).

**Motive and needs**

The relationship between participant and objective in an activity perhaps manifests in the process of doing. What I discuss here is what might underlie the activity itself – that is the motives and needs of the participant. If there is tension between objective and motive then the activity itself may fall into conflict – it is this conflict, which might result in anxiety in the doing of activities where this tension is present. I am interested in exploring how motives and needs relate to each other and to the process of doing. I am interested in asking what might be the relationship between the motive of an activity and the needs of participants – where do
the needs of the community come into these relationships; how might these relationships affect the contextual experience of an activity?

In this paper I primarily discuss motive and needs in relation to the psychology of Activity Theory— but I am also interested in the philosophical position upon motive. Perhaps, motive can be discussed in terms of what people really want in a context. This might be a case of belief, when considering what is said to be the purpose, intention or goal of an activity and what is actually the case. Perhaps the psychotherapy work of Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1967) links philosophical and psychological needs where he suggests that what is experienced as a motive is not necessarily so, that I might be systematically deceived about what motivates my activities.

So, if motives are philosophically related to real-wants, then in Activity Theory motives are inherent in defining the objective of an activity. When the specificity of activity is considered it is the role of motive, which reveals the objective - motive might be the objective that meets a need. At anyone time a participant can be interacting with many objectives and motives - it is this notion of multiple (or poly) objectives and motives that forms a hierarchical structure of participant–objective interaction. Whilst I am wary of models which employ structuralist hierarchies, this hierarchy of interaction appears to be worth exploration here - might it lead to a way of exploring the relationships between motives and objectives of activities? In this model the higher an objective in the hierarchy the greater is the need for this objective to be met - with the top-level objective in the hierarchy obtaining a pre- eminent status. Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi (2006) assert that the participant is attempting to attain this objective itself - the objective is experienced by the participant as that which can meet their needs. Consequently, the objective of the activity motivates the participant - the objective becomes the motive of the activity. From this movement of motive toward objective, activity can be seen as a system of processes orientated toward attaining the motive - the meaning of any mediating component of this activity is perhaps determined by its role of attaining the motive.
Further to this relationship between objective and motive is the role of needs which are perhaps linked to objective. An objective is the need for an end; that is the end is not achievable without the objective - a need is whatever is required for the end to be achieved. Alexi Leontiev suggests that the cause behind activity is driven by needs which can be both biological and psychological (Leontiev, 1978). These biological needs are a requirement of an organism’s survival - psychological needs are the direction of an activity toward the world. A psychological need is expressed in behaviour and moulded by experience.

There do however appear to be some issues regarding the role of motive in Activity Theory. The definition of objective of activity used by Alexei Leontiev (*ibid*) and cited by Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi (2006) perhaps causes some of these issues,

According to the terminology I have proposed, the object of an activity is its true motive. It is understood that the motive may be either material or ideal, either present in perception or existing only in the imagination or in thought. (p.144)

Might this definition cause questions to be asked regarding the nature of “true motive”? If the objective of activity is true motive then does it follow that untrue motive exists? If so, what is its definition and how does untrue motive sit in Activity Theory? There appear to be inconsistency in Alexi Leontiev’s concept of motive, which makes it unclear as to whether motives do or do not direct activities. This is of interest as the role of motive, and particularly tensions caused by poly-motivated activity, has a possible significance in the tensions regarding the conflict I discussed earlier. Perhaps then, Poly-motivated activity has a particular significance in Activity Theory - might Activity Theory’s position on multiple-motives be at best inconsistent?

Alexei Leontiev (*ibid*) does raise the issue of multi-motivational activity and discusses this in relation to an activity having two or more motives. However, the difficulties with multi or poly-motivated activity begin when discussing the nature of the relationship between the constituent parts of activity. In this model there appears to be a 1:1:1:1 relationship between activities, needs, motives and objectives. This 1:1:1:1 ratio causes issues when exploring
whether an activity does not exist without a single motive - can an activity only have one motive?

The issue of potential poly-motivated activity appears problematic in Activity Theory because there is no clear indication of the position multiple motives hold in activity. It seems relevant then to discuss the relationship between motives, and the resolution of motive-conflict. Alexei Leontiev (1978) explored poly-motives by talking about two distinct types of motive - sense-forming motive and motive-stimuli. Sense-forming motive can be seen as giving activity its meaning where as motive-stimuli engender additional motivation to an activity whilst not changing the activities meaning. These two motive types are worthy of note, as they are part of a hierarchy of motives where if conflict between motives occurred, then sense-forming motive would overcome the motive-stimuli.

This model has shortcomings, which are perhaps addressed by Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi’s (2006) amendments that separate the motive from the activity - activity and motive are not the same, there is an important and clear distinction. For example, two activities with needs and motives exist but as soon as conflicting motives are inserted into the hierarchy of motives then only one activity survives - the two motives appear to have competed. What the amended model suggests is that separating motive from objective implies that several competing needs results in two – or more – different activities or different aspect so the same activity. What this model appears to lead to a situation where objectives are dynamically constructed by contextual, temporal and spatial constraints. It is this multiple dynamic construction of motives – and activities - which direct my interested in a model where a participant attempts to, attain two or more motives simultaneously. Might this multiple attainment be reflected in tensions and indeed resolutions of motive-conflicts?

**Motive-conflict**

The discussion in the previous section now leads to an exploration of motive-conflict. The first point here is to clarify that my use of motive-conflict is in response to possible confusion regarding the use of terms such as conflict and contradiction in Activity Theory literature – see for example the work of Karri Kuutti (1996), Bonnie Nardi (1996) and Yrjö Engeström (1987).
Here motive-conflict is the possible tension experienced by a participant when engaging in an activity with multiple or competing motives – contradiction however, arises from conflicting motives for a shared objective. Conflict refers to the activity motive; contradiction refers to the objective of the activity itself – for work on contradictions and tensions in education see for example Wolff-Michael Roth and Ken Tobin (Roth & Tobin, 2002). As Karri Kuutti (1996) suggests, contradictions ‘indicates a misfit between elements of activities causing an imbalance between them’ (p.34). Might this “imbalance” hold the key to understanding shifts in the day-to-day experience of activities - that there is a degree of inevitability in motive-conflict?

Although conflict might be inevitable in an activity, the result of such tensions can be problematic until resolved. Bonnie Nardi (1996) describes contradictions as problems, ruptures, breakdowns and clashes within an activity system. Despite these ‘problems’, it is significant to recognise that activities can work through contradictions to resolution. Conflicts, contradictions and tensions, which possibly result from poly-motivated activity, might as Lisa Yamagata-Lynch (2007) posits, encourage the activity not only to rupture but also to collapse totally.

So, perhaps the complexity of multiple activities and motives leading to an apparent collapse of an activity might not be necessarily so - that instead of an activity collapsing it is instead at a point of what I call transference - that the activity, motive and objective are in a temporal and spatial fluidity of existence. It is this potential for multilevel transference, which appears to highlight the importance of focus in Activity Theory analysis. If the focus is upon the activity as a whole then nuances of experience might appear to be inevitably missed – it is the focus upon differentiating parts of the activity that appears important here. The role of motive-conflict and contradictions in activity might be a means of exploring a multilevelness of both activity and transference itself – after all, is it not motive and objective which underpin activity?

What then might be the role of contradiction in transference? Dorothy Holland and James Reeves discuss in detail the role of contradictions in Activity theory analysis and assert that, 

Contradictions...direct attention to historical structures and contemporary social struggles and dynamics that, in a sense, lie beyond, but profoundly
shape the institutionally supported activities of the workplace and the classroom. (Holland & Reeves, 1996) (p.272)

From this, perhaps it is the relationship between the histories of the activity system and the ‘social struggles and dynamics’ that might shape the system, which is perhaps related to contradictions. Could it be that ‘institutionally supported activities’ might themselves – in their mediational role as norms perhaps – cause motive-conflict? As Dorothy Holland and James Reeves (1996) go onto suggest, ‘contradiction marks out the major and derivative oppositions [to motive, objective or activity] set in motion...’ (p.273). Rather than look at motive-conflict and contradictions in terms of ‘oppositions’ perhaps exploring the transference through these might reveal the participants’ multileveled experience of the activity.

There is a range of technical issues raised here – most notably perhaps relating to how to focus an Activity Theory analysis. It is this discussion of motive-conflict, which perhaps leads me away from disusing specific technical aspects of Activity Theory and toward some of the possible limitations of Activity Theory.

**Limitations of Activity Theory Framework**

Here I draw on an article written by Lisa Yamagata-Lynch (2007) where she discusses some of these possible limitations – see also Victor Kaptelinin and Bonne Nardi (2006) for other such concerns – and details her frustrations with the Activity Theory triangle model in **Figure 1.** For example, Lisa Yamagata-Lynch suggests that ‘When I began drawing the (triangle) diagrams, I realized that the real-world context was far more complicated than the triangle representations I was drawing’ (p.453); ‘...it became very difficult to manage the simultaneous cycles of activities that were initiated by multiple individuals directed toward similar objects’ (p.459); ‘The effective communication of activity systems depends upon the researcher’s ability to identify distinct and meaningful units of object-directed activities’ (p472) (Yamagata-Lynch, 2007).

I would imagine that perhaps Activity Theorists would suggest that the triangle model is not to be used in this way – that it is only a representation of activity. However, if this is the case then why use the triangle model at all? Perhaps this is again a case for revisiting the role of
focus in my Activity Theory analysis – that is what is the objective of what I am doing? Lisa Yamagata-Lynch (ibid) goes on to discuss her experiences of focus in her analysis,

Even though tensions were encapsulated within single activity systems, I found that they were influenced by other related activities enacted by various subjects within real-world context but beyond the scope of the triangle diagram. I realized that although my intention to zoom in to a specific subject’s activity was a useful method for extracting complex human activities and identifying some of the obvious tensions, in order to identify more complicated tensions brought about by activities enacted by other participants I had to zoom out of the single activity unit of analysis and analyze the relationship between activities and the implications of those relationships. In other words, I had to shift my focus back and forth between individual activity systems and related actives that had an effect on those units. (p.477)

Might it be this need to ‘zoom’ in and out of a context, which rather than clarifies, muddies the water yet more? Could it be that a focus upon the here-and-now of phenomenological bracketed life-world, might give a temporal and spatial fluidity to the analysis - instead of zooming in and out of activities to find a focus might the experience of the activity itself be the focus? I do not want to get bogged down in a discussion upon what might, or might not, be the most effective route toward analysis of activity. What I am attempting to do here is to contextualise some of my experiences of Activity Theory limitations – experiences that appear to resonate with the research of Lisa Yamagata-Lynch.

Exploring the limitations of Activity Theory is not solely related to the role of focus, motive-conflict and objective contradictions. For Example, Harry Daniels in his co-edited book with Rob Moore, Madeleine Arnot and John Beck critiques Activity Theory through the work of Basil Bernstein (Moore, Arnot, Beck, & Daniels, 2006; Sadovnik, 1995). Here, Harry Daniels indicates that Activity Theory benefits from Bernstein’s work outlining the relationship between the processes, which regulate the structure of a tool, rather than just focusing on the tools function. It is this structure rather than function which appeasers to have some resonance with my experiences. The structure of a mediating tools experience is not necessity the same as the functionality of the tool – indeed the tool’s function might be in tension with the objectives and structure of the activity.
Amending the Analysis

Perhaps then it seems that Activity Theory analysis might try to look for structure where none necessarily exists. Perhaps it is this non-fluidity of analysis, which leads back to my previous discussion relating to motives, and needs and phenomenology. Here I present a hypothesis, which suggests the possibility for inertness in Activity Theory, which results from a lack of analysis focusing upon this immediate experience of activity. As Bonnie Nardi and Victor Kaptelinin suggest, it is the relationship between multiple interlinked activities and poly-motives (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), which underpins the meaning of activity to the individual. If this is so, then the possibility for endless interlinked activities might exist at any one temporal and spatial location – hardly any wonder perhaps that Lisa Yamagata-Lynch (2007) became frustrated at the tension between the activity triangle diagram and her empirical data. Here I present a reformation of the Activity Theory triangle shown in Figure 1 to a visual representation mediating the degree of relationships between the mediating components of activity shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3** - Relationship between mediating components of activity.
This amended diagram might lend an exploration of a specific context in the experience of the participant in an activity - it is being able to explore the relationship between the mediating components, which may help to alleviate some of the issues regarding focus explored previously. Although I have drawn on the comments of Lisa Yamagata-Lynch (ibid) there are other experiences of researchers regarding the triangle model. For example, As Karri Kuutti suggests,

Although the triangle model may seem somewhat rigid, it is only for the sake of representational simplicity and convenience. Remember that Activity Theory considers activities not as given or static but as dynamic. Activities are always changing and developing. (Kuutti, 1996) (p.33)

The question here appears to be who’s convenience and who’ simplicity? If a diagrammatical representation is not an illustration of what it claims to depict then indeed of use? In the context of this paper, I have found this reformation helpful to me in exploring the relationship between these mediational components – particularly with regard to the lack of activities being represented as a ‘given’ and instead as ‘dynamic’ and ‘always changing and developing’. What I want to explore here is a middle ground between perhaps Karri Kuutti’s acceptance of the activity triangle and Lisa Yamagata-Lynch’s apparent frustration at trying to push on regardless with what might be a flawed model.

The activity triangle in Figure 1 is this analytical model that explores activity in relation to the mediating components of activity. Here, I suggest that this generic diagrammatical model might lead to representing inertness in these relationships, an inertness that is potentially not evident in the constant formation and reformation of personal activities. Perhaps then, the third generation model might be inadequate in presenting of poly-motivated and interlinked activities. Using a phenomenological interpretation of activity however, might lead to a fluidity of analysis via a reformation of the triangle model from that of a representation of generic activity to one, which explores the specific phenomenological experience of a temporal and spatial activity in Figure 3.

The first stage of this reformation explored what might be the givens, which surround the use of the triangle model. Might the triangles solid lines between the mediating components of activity suggest a lack of the dynamic spatial and temporal fluidity, which might be present?
Perhaps also, the triangle model suggests a hierarchy of mediating components with tools having primacy over all others, including the participant–objective relationship. I ask why are tools located at the apex of the triangle – yes tools mediate activity, but might there be a relationship where for example norms and tools are experienced as pre-eminent in that context. What is the meaning behind tools being at the top of the triangle model – is that always the case? Perhaps it is a case here where the focus of analysis returns to that of motive and needs - a participant has needs and it is through an objective objectifying these needs, that an activity becomes experienced in the participants’ life-world. As Victor Kaptelinin and Bonnie Nardi suggests, the mediating components - which encompass all six constitutional parts of the participant’s engagement with activity - do just that, mediate the participant-object relationship within activity (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Consequently, a representation of the degree of the relationship through the weight of lines between the mediating components shown in Figure 4 might engender a multiple level of analysis.

**Figure 4** – Degree of relationship between mediating components of activity.

The representation of the participant-objective relationship - instead of using the potentially hierarchical segmented equilateral triangle - employs a hexagon, which could delineate relationships that are not necessarily hierarchical. The interconnections between mediating components instead of always being identical solid lines are replaced by a combination of dots,
and two line thickness which might demonstrate the degree of relationship between these components at a spatial and temporal point in the activities doing - there are different degrees of relationship in an activity. An example of these relationships is shown in Figure 4 the activity has a strong degree of relationship between participant and objective and between tools and objective (delineated by the thicker line) – there is a less strong degree of relationship between tools and community (the thinner line). The dots represent that there is a relationship between these mediating components in the activity but that it is not necessarily a primary part of the participants’ experience. A diagram might have a complete lack of dots between mediating components – this is perhaps a strength of this model in that the activity is not fully formed and is in the process of becoming objectified. Identifying where relationships are not formed also might leads to exploring why this might be the case – is there an opportunity here for representing motive-conflict in an activity diagrammatically?

What this amended model attempts to do is give a sense of the here-and-now experience of an activity – that the complexity of activities should not be constrained by an analysis perhaps trying to tick boxes. Perhaps this hexagon model might represent a relationship between the activity mediating components that exist spatially and temporally in the phenomenological experience of the activity. The triangle model may have mediated a possibly contradictory inert exploration of the constant dynamic and fluid interrelationships present in activity. The hexagon diagram possibly engenders a specificity of diagrammatical analysis previously absent – might being able to explore the interrelationship between mediating components of activity in the participants experience of the activity reveal hitherto opaque analytical levels? An example of this model is shown in Figures 5 and 6.

In the Figure 5 the participant is experiencing using a tablet personal computer (TPC) in an Yr10 science lesson - the amended model possibly engenders an opportunity to explore the participants’ experience of this temporal and spatial context. In Figure 6 the analysis focuses not upon the activity as a whole because the activity might not exist as a neat whole at any one time – what happens here is an exploration of how the mediating components relate to each other in this context. So, the participant appears to experience a strong relationship with the objective of the activity – facilitating a learning experience for the students – but a weak
relationship between the norms related to this activity and a specific part of the school community. The question here then asks why this might be the case? Why does the participant not experience a strong relationship between norms and community – perhaps there is a strong relationship here it is just this participant who does not experience it as such. If so, why might this be?

**Figure 5** – Specific data contextualising activity.
Figure 6 – Relationships between data and mediating Components.

Could the tensions and fluidity of the activity depicted in Figure 6 mediate an exploration of personal motives, which could be in conflict with those of different mediating components? What appears noteworthy here is that a tool such as a digital technology does not have a motive itself – however, perhaps it can affect the personal motives of the participant using it.

Concluding Thoughts

Perhaps currently, Activity Theory explores ways of moving through conflicts in a journey of reformation of motive, need and ultimately activity itself. However, the reformative Marxist underpinnings of Activity Theory and its concern with transformation could be conceived as James Avis suggests 'non reformist reform' (Avis, 2007) (p.175) with conflict resolution experienced as an emancipatory movement. However, it is the reformation of needs in relation to mediating components, which leads James Avis (ibid) to describe Activity Theory as located in a ‘conservative praxis’ (p.161). Without locating activity within personal meaning then inevitably the status quo of a specific activity system remains. Although conflicts may be worked through, the underpinning need of the individual still has to be met. Needs are met by activity - motive underpins personal meaning of activity and motive is located within
immediate experience of activity. For Activity Theory to progress from reinforcing systemic norms, it is analysis of activity within a temporal and spatial context in the participants’ experience, which may reform personal as opposed to systemic needs. My concern here is that without exploring the experience of mediating components, activity, motive and needs holistically, and not inertly, then Activity Theory may underpin systems instead of exploring the needs of the participants.

It is this thought of personal needs, motives, objectives and experience of activity which perhaps underpins my amendments to the Activity Theory triangle model. It is important here to reiterate that this paper is not a critique of Activity theory – more my objective is to explore what might be considered a reflexive consideration of some of the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of Activity Theory as an analytical tool. If the reformation of the triangle model I suggest here leads to analysis located in a participant’s life-world then perhaps instead of a generic conservative praxis Activity Theory might become located in the phenomenological lived experience of the participant.

References


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