Critical Reflections on Contemporary Sociocultural and Activity Issues. *Conversation with Andy Blunden.- ISCAR NEWS, Volume 9, Issue 3.*

Marilyn Fleer: One of the challenges that I have observed (as have others) is how terms such as sociocultural, cultural-historical and activity theory are used - not just in presentations, but in journal articles and book chapters.

> **Andy:** As Davydov observed near the end of his life, "the problem of activity and the concept of activity are *interdisciplinary* by nature." And yet the entire structure of the academic world in which ISCAR members work is far from interdisciplinary; it is fragmented, in fact, into a hundred disciplines, each with its own concepts and specialised language. This fragmented intellectual world is necessarily reflected in the development of Cultural and Activity Research, what I call CHAT. On top of this, we have the ethos of competitiveness which rewards originality, and encourages ceaseless terminological innovation. Over and above this, we have the problems arising from the very difficult and complex history of Activity Theory itself.
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> As to the usage of the terms you mention, it is difficult to make generalisations, as one and the same word can mean different things to different people, but the following very general observations could be made. I think that those who omit the word "Activity," want to distance themself from Leontyev and other theorists who addressed the formation of the social situation itself, not just the development of an individual within a social situation. Most educators and psychologists, like others in their discipline, take a person's social situation as a given.
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> The omission of the word "Historical" generally distances a person from the entire heritage we have received from the Soviet Union and Marxism. ISCAR itself is guilty of this omission. Indeed, this is a heritage which brings a lot of baggage along with a deep understanding of human development. Generally, both those who thoughtlessly apply the label of "historical" to their approach, and those who thoughtlessly avoid it, make the mistake of presuming that an historical approach means that communities are conceived of and compared as *totalities* and that history unfolds by means of a series of such totalities. But this is not the case: both a human community and the historical evolution of such communities is multifaceted, not univalent. When understood in this way I think "history" is an indispensable part of our theory, whether we include it in our name or not.
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> When people refer to themselves simply as "Activity Theorists" this is sometimes reflective of their primary interest in organisations rather than either the psychological problems of individuals, or the larger cultural and historical domain. Again this is a product of the fragmentation of academia into disciplines.

Marilyn: I have noted that some people seem to think that 'cultural' in cultural-historical is about ethnicity; I have also noted that some people use the word sociocultural, and then talk about social constructivism; I have also noted that many people discuss Activity Theory and only ever discuss Engeström.

> **Andy:** The words with which we describe our own views have to make sense to those in the wider community as well as to ourselves, and in the main people do not understand how *profoundly* we take the human being as formed by the use of cultural artefacts in culturally-specific forms of activity. Consequently people simply don't understand the sense in which we say "cultural." And in today's multicultural and postcolonial world, cross-cultural problems attract widespread attention. So people tend to assume that "cultural psychology" just

means "comparative psychology," so to speak, concerned with cultural difference.

On the other hand, Piaget's theory of individual development is consistent with the individualistic conceptions which are dominant in modern capitalist society, and are more widely known than Vygotsky. Strictly according to the meaning of the word "construction," both Vygotsky and Piaget are "social constructivists," but Piaget's more restricted conception of social construction has become widely known and we have to deal with that.

As to Activity Theory being so widely identified with that of Yrjö Engeström, to the exclusion of Soviet and European formulations, we should take note of how Engeström has achieved this feat. His famous diagram functions both as a logo or flag expressing the affiliation of all those who use it to a definite research community, *and* an effective heuristic which, notwithstanding frequent misuse, facilitates the use of his theory by newcomers. It would be good if we could devise some simple effective semiotic devices to communicate alternatives to Engeström's very effective communication approach.

Marilyn: What are we doing wrong? What can we do to theoretically support the field?

Andy: The very existence of ISCAR is a great first step towards realising Activity Theory and Cultural Psychology as a unified research community with its own concepts and consistent terminology. But we face very great barriers because we are swimming against the tide of postmodern fragmentation.

In the 1980s, there was a lot of discussion about the fundamentals of CHAT, but this faded away without, I think, achieving its end: a generally agreed philosophical foundation for CHAT. The collapse of the Soviet Union then compounded this problem by introducing the free-market approach to theory into the former Soviet bloc and an antipathy towards Marxism. In more recent times, study of the foundations of CHAT has been overtaken by competitive interpretations of Vygotsky's life and history which, in my view, has not reached a consensus and is unlikely to in the future. The writing of history tends to prove the writer's own preconceptions; a consensus on philosophical foundations has to come first.

Two research projects are needed to confront this problem. Firstly, an effort to reformulate the philosophical foundations of CHAT in a way which would stand up to critical review in a journal of philosophy, not just in our own journals, challenging figures like Robert Brandom, Robert Williams, Axel Honneth and so on. Secondly, we need to foster the activity approach to the real problems of post-modern capitalist life and geopolitics, integrating Activity Theory with Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' and other currents of Marxism such as Lukács, Bloch, Bourdieu and so on.

CHAT is relatively well-established in Psychology and Sociology, but before it can fulfil its potential, it has to conquer philosophy and extend into social theory. The main challenge we have to face here is interactionism.

Marilyn: What you mean by interactionism?

Andy: By 'interactionism' I mean those currents of social philosophy which set out to understand human nature based solely on interactions between individuals. Put this way, CHAT is one variety of interactionism, but CHAT is unique in two respects: Firstly, we see all actions and interactions as essentially *mediated* by material objects, whether symbols or tools. The production of these artefacts depends on *pre-existing* material conditions and activity. Secondly, a human action can only be understood in terms of the activity it furthers, but

these activities, or projects, *pre-exist* the actions composing them. People don't create projects, generally, they *join* them. But for interactionism (other than CHAT, that is), human beings bounce around like billiard balls on a level plane, with every interaction independent of every other, with no purpose beyond the immediate object. This vision expresses post-modern bourgeois consciousness: a world of mutually isolated atoms. The problem it creates for the acceptance of CHAT is that interactionism is associated with an entrenched antipathy to the inclusion of material conditions in social philosophy, and the rejection of 'concept' as a valid scientific concept. Even within our own ranks, some people think that Vygotsky's interest in concepts is outmoded and old fashioned.

Marilyn: You have written about concepts from a Cultural-Historical perspective in your book *Concepts. A Critical Approach*. What argument would you make to those who think that Vygotsky's interest in concepts is outmoded and old fashioned? Who is thinking this, and why do they think that?

Andy: It is widely accepted that A N Leontyev was the founder of Activity Theory, with a capital-A and a capital-T, but as I see it, it was Vygotsky who was the real founder of activity theory. Vygotsky took the unit of the intellect to be 'word meaning', but in Vygotsky's view 'word meaning' is not some dead thing found in a dictionary, an attribute of a word, but an *action*. And as A N Leontyev made explicit, the meaning of an action lies in the activity which it serves. So word meanings relate to concepts in the same way that actions relate to activities. By setting out, in *Thinking and Speech*, the relation between word meaning and concepts, Vygotsky laid the basis for Activity Theory.

Think about it. What is an activity? How do you put a circle around it? How do you sense and describe an activity? How do you know what activity an individual action belongs to? It is not immediately given. It requires reflection. It is not obvious whether the child is reading a book in order to learn, to amuse herself or to please the teacher. Concepts are like that. They are what drive word meanings. A concept is a whole system of object-oriented actions, an activity.

Formal, analytical thinking does not see this however. Following Frege and Boole, analytical thinkers take concepts to be nothing more than a bundle of attributes by means of which objects may be sorted into pigeon holes. Even a careful critical thinker like Wittgenstein took concepts like that, and for that very reason, through a strict study of human action, he rejected the idea of concepts lying behind word meaning. Many pragmatists and interactionists arrive at the same conclusion: word meaning, not concept, is the ultimate reality.

Marilyn: I wonder if we could return to your earlier comment that "strictly according to the concept of 'construction', both Vygotsky and Piaget are "social constructivists," but Piaget's more restricted conception of social construction has become widely known and we have to deal with that." Can you now talk a little more about this? tease it out?

Andy: Sure. Over the past century or two, social philosophy and the human sciences generally have been trying to work out how all the features of human life are *created*. Where does it all come from? Many approaches, including both CHAT and interactionism, try to show how it is all 'constructed' by *human activity*. Nothing else. CHAT differs from interactionism in that we understand that material conditions – land, buildings, tools, books, human bodies and so on – are essential mediators of action, but are themselves also products of action. Nature does not *in itself produce* human life, not without the aid of object-oriented human activity, in which, of course, people use Nature.

Piaget was a Kantian. So he believed that concepts (and therefore activities) were possible only thanks to the fact that the *categories* were built into, were innate, within the human brain. He did not accept that the categories themselves could be products of activity, since according to Kant, perception was possible in the first place only thanks to the categories. The categories had to come first. All the neuroscience people agree with Piaget and Kant on this. But Hegel transcended this point of view, showing in his Logic how the categories themselves could be produced by activity.

For both Kant and Piaget, cognition and activity are fundamentally individual. The whole is not greater than the sum of the parts. We owe to Goethe and Hegel the discovery that even though the whole is nothing *other than* the parts, it is *more than the sum* of the parts. Vygotsky began from this insight. His constructivism is truly social, from the very beginning.

Marilyn: In the education literature, 'constructivism' *is* about the individual (so supports Piaget's premise that you outline). But Vygotsky is *not* individualistic. So I don't get your last sentence: "His constructivism is truly social, from the very beginning."

Andy: This is why I cautioned from the outset that "one and the same word can mean different things to different people." Piaget can rightly describe his theory as 'social constructivism': he does not believe, for example, that a Chinese person is born with a knowledge of Chinese language and customs: an individual actively "constructs" her ability to use her native language and customs from her social environment. Everyone knows this. Piaget hoped to explain how a child achieves this construction through a series of transformations. I think it was in the philosophical foundations of mathematics that people first started to use the word "constructivism" in this sense, but "constructivism" means something in every different discipline. Check *Wikipedia*. A word is meaningful only within the context of the activity it signifies.

But we know that Piaget's conception of social construction is very limited compared to that of Vygotsky. Piaget observed that the categories develop according to an innate process of maturation within each individual child and social interaction serves to *realise* and fill the categories with content. As Vygotsky put it: for Piaget, development leads instruction. As Vygotsky showed with his genetic-experimental method, development (that is, the formation of the categories themselves) is a result of "instruction," that is to say, participation in historically and culturally specific activities. So for Vygotsky, instruction leads development.