Towards a cultural history of CALL

Gary Motteram

Language Teacher Education, School of Education
University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK
gary.motteram@manchester.ac.uk

This paper begins to explore the role that sociocultural theory can play in developing our understanding of the increasingly complex world of CALL. It focuses specifically on Activity Theory as a way of exploring the ‘contexts and dimensions’ of CALL, but which also helps us build a situated picture of CALL in action. Activity theory is already being used in a number of fields to explore the lived experiences of social practice. The social practice in this paper is described as captured in case studies, which are being collected as a part of an ongoing project that is a collaboration between the Cambridge University Press (CUP) and the University of Manchester and while the case studies are not described in this paper, because of lack of space, they will eventually give us a deep insight into the developing world of CALL.

1. Introduction

In our increasingly complex world in which digital technologies become more deeply embedded in what humans do, so we might eventually see it as normalised (Bax, 2003), we need a more comprehensive theory of learning to explain the world of computer assisted language learning (CALL) than we have used hitherto. In many other parts of the computing world (Nardi and Kapetlinin (2006), in areas of applied linguistics (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) and in education (Roth and Lee (2007), sociocultural theory has become increasingly seen as having value in trying to explain the complexities of teacher and learner worlds. This paper will make use of one sociocultural theory, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT, hereinafter referred to as Activity Theory – AT), to provide a way of better describing and understanding the ‘activity’ that we engage in as practitioners and the processes that our learners undertake.

2. Activity theory and CALL

AT is increasingly recognised as being a powerful tool for enabling educators both to describe what teachers and learners do in ‘classrooms’ and at the same time place classrooms within their broader cultural-historical context. It is important that we do this because as CALL practitioners we need to show how what we do is connected to the wider worlds of computing and education, but as well show how some of what we do is different and distinct. CHAT is also relevant to the field of CALL because it is a subject that is steeped in ‘activity’; we need to engage with other people in order to use language and also in order to learn.

This has been shown very effectively in interactionist theory (see Levy and Stockwell, 2006 for a useful background on this area of applied linguistics research).

Activity Theory (AT) has its origins in the work of Lev Vygotsky who at the beginning of the 20th century was interested in exploring how children develop higher level cognitive processes. He suggested that for humans to develop beyond their basic biological make-up they needed to engage in goal directed activity, mediated through cultural artefacts.

Cultural artefacts can be sign and symbols, but also tools (Figure 1).

Vygotsky’s ideas were further developed by Leont’ev and Luria in the Soviet Union, amongst others, but did not really known in the west until his writings began to be translated in the 1960s and 70s. A key western proponent of AT is Engeström (2001) who has used AT to explore a number of contexts, but particular the world of work. In recent years he has proposed a 3rd
generation of AT (Figure 2) which he sees as being the only way of understanding our complex international and globalised world.

The 3rd generation of AT is useful in that it allows us to explore the relationship that is typical of a ‘classroom’ of the teacher and the learner.

If we see our shared objective in the ‘classroom’ as being the learning of a language (and I accept that this may not be the case in all classrooms around the world), then we can immediately see there are two possible activity systems work towards a shared object. The activity systems would depend on which phase of education we are in and Figure 3 is generalised to include school as well as adult and higher education where the rules, community, divisions of labour and the tools in use may be quite different. I have generalised the subject position to include both the teacher and the learners because although in many contexts it is the teacher who manages lessons and the learner can end up being quite passive, this is not my preferred model of education where I would like to see the learners as more active and engaged in the classroom. In AT ‘Rules’ are the conditions that are in place which govern the activity, in this case I have proposed the school curriculum for children, for adults learning a language it may be important to develop language skills in order to get a promotion or even to maintain a position in a company. The rules may be broader and it may be that the society itself sees language learning as an important process and perhaps languages have certain cultural or religious significance as well as the more pragmatic need to communicate needs and wants.

Language learning according to AT theory occurs first in the interpersonal plane and so it is the ‘community’ that you are engaged in that will help you develop language skills. As a young child learning your first language you will initially be supported by your caretakers and, if available, siblings in the initial stages, as a learner of languages at school the community changes as does the role of the parents. As an adult learner the conditions for study may be radically different and now it may well be lessons conducted in 2nd Life with the support of Wiki, or it may be a weekly class in a local education college supported by random handouts. The community that is interested in your progress may simply be yourself, but it could also be your boss at your annual appraisal who sees your progress on a language course as a key issue in your development as an employee.

The ‘divisions of labour’ may be as simple as those expressed in Figure 3 where it is teachers who see their role as managers of the process and learners engage because it is a lesson on the timetable. However, this is not necessarily the case and the motivation to learn the language may come form the learners themselves and the role of the teacher here is less important.

The tools in use may be many and various, but if we are concerned with the world of CALL, then the tools now available increase by the day and many of these are online.

The two activity systems may see the process of learning a language as rather different, the teacher may see certain tools as valid, the learner may make use of something totally different. The classroom may focus on the use of a specific textbook, but the learner may go home and chat online with English friends who are a part of their Facebook group. For the learner it may be the community of friends that provide the motivation to learn a language, not their parents or the exam system.

3. Conclusions

While in this brief paper I can only provide a theoretical background to the project that we are involved in, the case studies that will be produced...
as a part of the CUP/ Manchester project will show both the detail of the activity that the teachers and the learners engage in, but will also be able to use the framework of AT to look across the cases to see where there is agreement and where there is difference. The cases will enable the researchers on this project to gain a clearer picture of the developing world of CALL. It will be able to show analysis at the level of a particular classroom, the practice of a particular teacher and their learners, as well as giving us insights into ongoing CALL developments.

References