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Author
Wheelahan, Leesa

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Theorising the individual in an activity system
Leesa Wheelahan, Griffith University

This paper continues a conversation started by Stephen Billett (2003) at last year’s Annual International Conference on Post-compulsory Education and Training in which he argued that we need to socialise the individual and individualise the social to understand the relationship between agency and society. This is important for post-compulsory education and training, because conceptions which downplay individual agency tend to privilege ‘authentic’ workplace learning at the expense of the broader development of the individual, and (paradoxically) underplay the importance of underpinning theory. Approaches that ignore the social, result in abstract and disembodied learning divorced from the social context in which it is to be realised. This paper uses critical realism to contribute to the discussion on the relationship between individual agency and society, and the implications that ensue for post-compulsory education and training, through theorising the nature of the individual in an activity system. Understanding the relational interplay between the individual and society and the relative autonomy of both, results in policy that does not reduce the needs of the learner to the needs of enterprises and identifies the different needs of both.

Introduction
In his keynote presentation to last year’s annual international post-compulsory education and training conference, Stephen Billett (2003) drew our attention to the individual, and argued that we needed to bring the individual back into our social theorising: that we needed to socialise the individual and individualise the social. He was invoking the old agency/structure debate, and while this debate is unresolved, it is still important because it has implications for what we do. These include methodological implications for research, but there are also social policy implications for the nature of qualifications and curriculum, and implications for teaching and learning and pedagogy.

This paper uses both critical realism and activity theory to explore the nature of the individual and their relationship to society. I argue that they may be complementary theoretical approaches as the resonances between them are quite strong, while acknowledging that there are important differences between each. In particular, I suggest that some realist social theorists may under-socialise the individual, while some activity theorists may over-socialise the individual. However, both offer important insights into the relationship between the individual and society and have implications for education and training because both are materialist and realist, and focus on practice in the world as the way in which we understand the world and create new knowledge. Activity theory has explicit Marxist origins (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999), while critical realism has resonances with Marxism, in particular, its more ‘open’ versions (Sayer, 1992; 2000).

Critical realism
Critical realism makes claims about the nature of reality in distinguishing between the real world and our knowledge of it, arguing that what exists (including society and social structures) does not depend on what we think about it or know about it. While the natural and social world exists independently of our conceptions of them, our knowledge of both is fallible and provisional because our experience of the world is always theory-laden (though not theory determined) (Sayer, 1992). Bhaskar (1998: x)
explains that critical realism is premised on “a clear concept of the continued independent reality of being…” and “the relativity of our knowledge ….”

There are resonances between the way realist social theory and activity theory use abstraction and description to analyse society, and the way both seek to identify underlying casual mechanisms rather than restricting our theorising of the world to that which we can see and experience (the level of actions). Moreover, both reject the positivist search for prediction, which is grounded in an atomistic understanding of the social world and is based on the search for constant conjunctions of events, rather than a relational analysis of causal relationships (Tolman, 1999; Sayer, 2000).

Realist social theory distinguishes between people and the parts, arguing that each is different and irreducible to the other. Social realism consequently uses analytical dualism to analyse the interplay between these irreducible components to explore the emergent properties that ensue. It insists on the relative autonomy of both individuals and social and cultural structures, while acknowledging that the latter are the product of social relations, and can only be elaborated through agency. This is in contrast to approaches which see agency and structure as mutually constitutive, with the latter ‘instantiated’ through social practices (Porpora, 1998).

Social structures are the outcome of past social interaction between agents which condition the context in which current agents find themselves, and the way in which current agents respond to their context shapes the social structures in which future agents find themselves. The temporal dimension is important for realists, and Archer (1995) refers to this as the morphogenetic cycle. While Archer’s treatment of time differs to that of Engeström’s activity theory (1999a: 33), the resonances are clear, because the latter uses the notion of an expansive cycle to understand the emergence of new structures on the basis of the old.

Social structures shape current contexts through social relationships and social roles which carry their own causal ‘powers’ through the powers invested in the respective roles (Archer, 1995; 2000). For example, capacities and powers inhere in the role of teacher, landlord, or judge. Social realists conceive of social structure as “systems of human relations among social positions”, not as rules and resources that individuals draw on and instantiate through their daily practices (Porpora, 1998: 339). Social structures provide the ‘degrees of freedom’ which set the parameters for agency. People exercise free will, but not under conditions of their own choosing. The outcome results in unplanned and unintended consequences (Archer, 1995).

Archer (1995; 2000) argues though, that a person cannot be reduced to their social role, and that their being is not entirely the gift of society. She thus resists the over-socialisation of the individual in which the individual is entirely constructed through social processes (however defined). She argues that the sense of self is universal, while the concept of self is historically and socially constructed. Rather than the self being discursively constructed, Archer says that the self is relatively autonomous, and that a continuous self is a precondition for society to function at all. The self is defined by things that matter to us, including who and how we choose to love, our priorities, and where we choose to ‘invest’ ourselves. This goes beyond the self of rational choice theory which is premised on an instrumental self-maximising economically ‘rational’ self. Our emotions, far from being irrational, are commentaries on the things that matter to us; however our emotions (as with all perception) may be wrong because they are fallible. The self is consequently capable of acts of true selflessness, but usually will exact a ‘cost’ in the process, if this involves making choices that are against the individual’s prestructured interests (for example, class interests).
Archer argues that our ‘inner conversation’ – or our active self awareness and self consciousness – mediates our relationship with the world, and that this ‘conversation’ occurs through considering our relationship to the wider world – it is not purely self-referential (Archer, 2000; 2003). Our internal commentary is part of our active response to the world, or part of our practice in the world. Archer (2000: 193) says that “The inner life enjoys its own relative autonomy, temporal priority and causal efficacy, as a player in the drama and not as some disinterested ‘voice off’.” She says that this internal conversation has been relatively ignored in social theorising, and as a consequence, has resulted in an under-theorised individual. She says our inner life helps to generate our personal identity and that it “intertwines with [our] sociality, but exists sui generis and cannot be reduced to it” (Archer, 2000: 194).

Archer (1995: 288) argues that our embodiment is prior to society, even if our capacities as homo sapiens “can only be exercised within it….Even in those cases where the biological may be socially mediated in almost every instance or respect, such as child-care, this does not mean that the mediated is not biological nor that the physical becomes epiphenomenal.” Our development as human beings involves more than just participation in ‘society’s conversation’. From the day we are born and before we develop sociality, we experience the world through practice in it, as we begin the process of differentiating self from other, and then differentiating between different kinds of other. Archer (2000: 121) argues that it is our practice in the world that gives rise to our self-consciousness, explaining that this position “is a refusal to accord primacy to language…This is not simply of matter of [practice] coming before anything else, though temporally it does just that; it is also a question of viewing language itself as a practical activity, which means taking seriously that our words are quite literally deeds, and ones which do not enjoy hegemony over our other doings in the emergence of our sense of self.”

Archer argues that we all must live in the natural, practical and social worlds simultaneously, which gives rise to different kinds of concern in each: physical wellbeing in the natural, performative achievement in the practical, and self-worth in the social worlds respectively. Moreover, our practice in each gives rise to different kinds of knowing. Our direct (unmediated) relations in the natural world give rise to embodied (and tacit) knowledge, while our relations in the practical world which are mediated through material culture give rise to practical knowledge, and our relations in the social world are mediated through propositional culture and give rise to discursive knowledge (Archer, 2000: 162). She argues that not all knowledge can be rendered as propositional knowledge, and that we can know with our bodies as well as with our minds. Moreover, some knowledge can only be known with our bodies and cannot be represented discursively. This is similar to activity theory, where the mind is not an “inner sensorium”, and where knowing also involves bodily ways of knowing (Toulmin, 1999).

Archer (2000: 166-167) distinguishes practical from natural knowledge because unlike the latter, the former involves relations with material culture, while she distinguishes practical from discursive knowledge on four counts. First, practical knowledge is procedural because it is performative; second, “it is implicit, being encoded in the body as skills”; third, “it is tacit because it is reality understood through activity, not through the manipulation of symbols but of artifacts”; and fourth, it is “extensive of the body and of our bodily powers…” She says that the “mode of acquiring embodied knowledge” in the natural world is “quintessentially that of self-discovery”, whereas “the means of gaining practical knowledge is apprenticeship”, while “propositional knowledge is obtained through scholarship” (Archer, 2000: 167).
There is merit in distinguishing between the three orders of reality, because it helps us to understand that our concerns (the things that matter to us) are not wholly within one domain (the social). Our personal identity is the outcome of our reconciliation with the concerns we must engage with in each, how we decide what matters to us, and how much we decide to ‘invest’ of ourselves in each (Archer, 2000: 228).

However, Archer’s approach to different ways of knowing is overly schematic on two counts. First, she underestimates the extent to which our theories, ideas and concepts become embodied and become part of what we ‘know with’ (Bransford and Schwartz, 1999; Stevenson, 2003). Tacit knowledge is often reduced to skill, whereas Stevenson (2001: 657) argues that it is much more complex than this: “…it seems inappropriate to dismiss tacitness as a characteristic only of skills. Tacit knowing also seems to have a central place in the situational, conceptual, procedural and strategic knowledge of experts.” Tacit knowledge or expertise includes the knowledge, concepts, ideas and experiences that we have internalised. Similarly the distinctions between procedural and propositional knowledge are also overplayed, because expert use in one rests upon the capacity to use and make connections with expert use in another (Stevenson, 2003). While they may represent different ways of knowing, both are required for expert performance, and arguably, both must become tacit as a precondition for expert performance. Moreover, if our emotions are part of our bodily ways of knowing and commentaries on the things that matter to us, then we can ‘know with’ our emotions in the social world, often in ways that we cannot name (particularly emotions such as shame, or our ‘feel for the rules of the game’ (Sayer, 2005)). Archer seems to under-estimate the interpenetration between the three domains of reality, and the way knowledge in one is a precondition for knowledge in the other.

Second, Archer under-socialises the individual. She argues that “we can have non-social relations with non-social reality…”, because “we are committed to continuous practical activity in a material world, where subsistence is dependent upon the working relationship between us and things, which cannot be reduced to relations ‘between the ideas of men’. In this case, cumulative experiences of our environment will foster propensities, capacities and aversions which sift the social practices we later seek or shun, and thus the social identity which we then assume because of something that we already are as persons.” (Archer, 1995: 291-292). Archer argues for distinguishing a private realm for the person, such as swimming in the pool, going for a walk, or relations with God.

Archer fails to distinguish between the autonomy of the individual, and the process through which that autonomy is realised, which must be socially mediated. The capacity to engage in individual experiences are socially mediated, even such basic capacities as learning to swim or learning to walk, and certainly talking to God, given the culturally infinite representations of the transcendental. Over-socialised accounts err because they take the social mediation of learning to the unwarranted conclusion that there is no individual experience that is not the gift of society. I argue that the capacity for experiences that really are individual emerge from the interplay between the individual and the social. The private realm of individuals is indeed important, but it requires social mediation to realise it. This is not the same as situated learning theories which reduce the individual to the social, and which denies the existence of the autonomous individual. The individual thus requires a social context to develop the capacities to flourish in all three domains of reality, and this has implications for education and training. It means that individuals require self-understanding and broader social understanding (including of their workplace) and the relationship between the
self and the broader context. It also means that education and training must consider the holistic development of the individual (in the sense of Dewey’s vocation) and not abstract and disembodied skills as in supply and demand models of skills development.

Activity theory
Activity theory is a theory of human activity which emphasises the socially mediated nature of human activity. Unlike constructivist approaches which focus primarily on the discursive (or the construction of ‘texts’) as the source of meaning, activity theory is materialist because it focuses on practice, with communication a form of practice. Engeström and Miettinen (1999: 10) explain that:

“Exclusive focus on text may lead to a belief that knowledge, artifacts, and institutions are modifiable at will by means of rhetoric used by an author. Activity theory sees construction more broadly. People construct their institutions and activities above all by means of material and discursive, object-oriented actions.”

Activity theory refers to “object-oriented, collective, and culturally mediated human activity” (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999: 9) and an activity system is defined by a group that is working towards a common object (for example, the education of students in a school or the treatment of the sick in a hospital). Society consists of complex interactions and networks between different activity systems which “provide for movement of artifacts.” Networks are connected because “any local activity resorts to some historically formed mediating artifacts, cultural resources that are common to the society at large” (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999: 8). The temporal dimension is evocative of Archer’s use of time: “In their unique ways, [activity systems] solve problems by using general cultural means created by previous generations” (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999: 8). Activity theory considers the interaction between all the elements that make up the activity system in which a group is situated, and the inherent contradictions that characterise systems. It is these contradictions that lead to change and innovation. Engeström and Miettinen (1999: 9) explain that: “Minimum elements of this system include the object, subject, mediating artifacts (signs and tools), rules, community and division of labor.” While the critical realist notion of emergence is not invoked by activity theory, I think it could be usefully used to analyse the interaction between the different components in the activity system.

Engeström and Miettinen (1999: 10) explain that “Activity theory recognizes two basic processes operating continuously at every level of human activities: internalization and externalization. Internalization is related to reproduction of culture; externalization as creation of new artifacts makes possible its transformation.” They then cite Roy Bhaskar, a key theorist in critical realism, to explore the relationship between human agency and society. Engeström (1999a: 33-34) explains that in an expansive cycle of an activity system that the emphasis is initially on internalisation, “on socializing and training the novices to become competent members of the activity as it is routinely carried out.” Over time, the emphasis changes to ‘creative externalisation’, which “occurs first in the form of discrete individual innovations. As the disruptions and contradictions of the activity become more demanding, internalization increasingly takes the form of critical self-reflection – and externalization, a search for solutions, increases. Externalization reaches its peak when a new model for the activity is designed and implemented.” Engeström (1999b) uses activity theory to analyse the way in which knowledge is constructed in teams, by applying his notion of expansive cycles.
Activity theory is increasingly used in the education literature because it helps us to understand the relationship between the individual and the activity system, and the implications this has for the nature of learning. Students need to be able to skilfully work within an activity system, and to skilfully work with the tools used within the activity system (which includes theories and concepts) as part of their practice (Engeström, 1999a). Learning needs to involve becoming part of, learning about, and making connections between all elements of the activity system. It implies that dividing learning objectives into ‘declarative’ and ‘procedural’ objectives is far too narrow a way of conceiving learning, as learning to be part of, to understand, and to use the available tools within the activity system or community of practice involves holistic learning that goes beyond ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’, because it must also involve ‘knowing with’ (Stevenson, 2003). It also implies that dividing learning into ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ objectives or cognitive, psychomotor and affective objectives (or variations along these lines) results in disconnected learning and creates artificial distinctions based on hierarchies between different kinds of knowing (Stevenson, 2003).

However, activity theory suffers because it does not adequately theorise the individual, seeing the individual as ‘society’s gift’. For example, Tolman (1999: 82) says that: “The individual is society manifested in a single organism.” Earlier, Tolman (1999: 73) says that:

“Thus the necessary, conscious division of labor in human society is the most obvious indicator of the individual human’s societal nature. The individual is truly human only in society. Indeed, a still stronger conclusion can be argued: that human individuality itself is achievable only in society. The abstract individual of bourgeois individualism is a figment of the ideological imagination.”

The problem in reducing the individual to purely a social construction is that it cannot account for our ‘inner conversation’, the way in which we determine what is important to us, and the way in which we exercise reflexive agency; that is, the way in which we creatively animate the roles we occupy, and change those roles (and social structures) in the process. Our self awareness can only develop in the context of society, but this doesn’t mean that is all that there is to it. The development of our inner conversation is mediated by social processes, but it can’t be reduced to social processes. Otherwise, why are we not totally the creatures of our socialisation? How do we explain resistance and change? How can we be capable of acts of true selflessness and empathy with ‘the other’, unless it is through our understanding of our common humanity? We use the language, ideas and concepts of our society and culture, but we may use these in ways that are innovative, or which enable us to realise a private realm – our inner world.

Unless we see the relative autonomy of the individual (who can only develop in the context of society) then we are likely to privilege situated accounts of learning in ways that diminish the individual. This results in privileging only the learning that takes place in the activity system, and this does not take into account the holistic development of the individual. Approaches that emphasise ‘collective competence’ emphasise the immediate and situational as an antidote to the ‘abstract individual’ who ‘owns’ their competence (Boreham, 2004), but the juxtaposition of the collective and the neo-liberal individual is a false one. Boreham (2004) explains that socio-cultural theories of learning have emerged in response to individualistic theories which privilege the ‘economic man’ of neo-liberal reform. He has a point: the individualisation of skill arises from the methodological individualist theories which posit that society and all social formations are nothing more than the aggregation of individuals. The liberal individual is held to be unchanging and immutable with relatively fixed characteristics (Hobbes, 1985). However, a relational approach which sees the people and the parts as
different and irreducible to each other is able to focus on the processes of *interplay* between different components. It is also able to explain how individuals are transformed through this interplay. Both critical realism and activity theory argue that agency can be transformed, but where critical realism differs from activity theory is that the former sees this transformation as the consequence of a relational process, whereas activity theory privileges the social. I think this is not a *necessary* consequence of the theoretical premise underpinning activity theory, and that it could be enriched by aspects of critical realism.

While not necessarily attributing this view to Engeström, activity theory lends itself to privileging learning in the activity system, in common with other situated theories of learning. There is a twofold danger here. The first concerns unequal power relations within the activity system. While activity theory makes power relations explicit, unless the sites of learning go beyond the activity system, then the individual (novice) is at the mercy of these power relations. It is difficult to create spaces where the individual can question practice, criticise what they see, and develop their own theories and ideas. Teaching and learning cannot exclude the activity system, but it needs to include other sites of learning if learning in the activity system is to be empowering for novices.

The second danger is that despite the emphasis on tools in activity theory, and the (welcome) inclusion of theories, ideas and concepts as tools, that insufficient attention may be paid to underpinning theories and knowledge. This is because not all knowledge that we need to use emerges from practice within the activity system (Young, 2001). Young (2003) argues that the ‘hybrid’ and ‘insular’ curriculum need to be kept in creative tension. The emphasis in activity theory on practice results in interdisciplinarity, informal, applied and contextual knowledge, but this must not be at the expense of formal, disciplinary and codified knowledge, because the former rests upon the latter.

Finally, because activity theory does not have a robust theory of the individual, other than the individual as society’s gift, it does not envisage the learning needs of the individual who lives across the natural, practical and social domains simultaneously (Archer, 2000), and who needs the skills and knowledge to flourish in each. Unless we see the individual as relatively autonomous of the activity system, then we privilege learning in the activity system, and conflate the learning needs of individuals with the skill needs of their organisation or enterprise. They are different.

**Conclusion**

While there are important differences between them, critical realism and activity theory are complementary theories that we can use to develop a pedagogy that goes beyond procedural and declarative knowledge, one that is able to include both the holistic development of the individual as a reflexive being with self understanding and an understanding of the activity system that they work within. Both have shortcomings, however on balance, both make an important contribution to our understanding of the nature of the individual and their relationship to society.

**References**


