Apprentice, collaborator, colleague, competitor: Negotiating the trajectory(ies) of a doctoral student:

Kevin Larkin
Griffith University
<k.larkin@griffith.edu.au>

This chapter conceptualises, via an ‘Activity Theory’ approach, the journey of the author as a Doctor of Education (RHD) student. The RHD journey implicitly and explicitly involves membership of an academic community of practice and the author’s various experiences of this membership provides the ‘dataset’ for this chapter. As an initial position, Engestrom’s (1987) 3rd Generation Activity Systems is utilised to situate the author in this community of practice. The chapter will explore how the elements of Rules and Division of Labour mediate the author’s doctoral experiences. Tensions and complexities (contradictions in Activity Theory terms) within the experience including the influence of social capital; relationships with supervisor(s); relationships with the wider Griffith University community; and access to publishing opportunities in academic journals are conceptualised as avenues for the author to transform himself as researcher and also transform the culture of his research community. The academic experience is a dynamic one in terms of the author’s various subjectivities – student, apprentice researcher, author, colleague, and competitor. Membership Categorisation (Baker, 1997), is used to frame these subjectivities, and to theorise the role of an active subject who chooses from a range of available roles, and responds to a range of discourses within a particular context. The chapter will argue that neither Activity Systems nor Membership Categorisation is alone appropriate to fully articulate the complexity of the journey. A new model is proposed that more powerfully explains the author’s social and individual RHD experience.
NEGOTIATING ROLES AS TEACHER, STUDENT AND RESEARCHER

This chapter comprises a personal reflection which attempts to clarify and articulate perspectives of my Research Higher Degree (RHD) journey, initially using an Activity Systems approach to explain that journey. Yet, ultimately, it questions whether such a systems approach alone is sufficient to explain and analyse the range and qualities of the experiences that this journey constitutes for individuals. An alternative perspective is proposed which affords an explanation of the elements of my particular RHD context while accounting for the role of individual agency in mediating the affordances of these external social elements.

By way of background, my story thus far is not too dissimilar to the journey of many others involved in university life. I am a primary school teacher, currently working as a deputy at a Gold Coast school, a position held now for the past 12 years. During this time, I have completed two Masters Degrees and the coursework component of my Doctoral Degree. Currently, I am undertaking the data collection phase of my dissertation which is planned for completion by early 2010. I am also a casual tutor at Griffith University. In these ways, I work and engage in four distinct roles across at least three social systems in which my standing is different and my intentions are directed to diverse purposes. All this requires considerable negotiation. The doctoral journey I will chart, whilst similar to others who have ‘run this course’, is also personally distinct because it comprises negotiations of meaning, subjectivity between myself as variously a teacher, deputy, student and researcher and the social systems with which I engage, including the different theoretical positions that are promoted within academic disciplines and fields. This chapter seeks to serve two purposes; firstly, it is an account of my doctoral experience which I presented at both the 2008 Griffith University RHD Conference and also at the 2008, Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference; and secondly, via the actual writing process, to facilitate a greater personal understanding of the very experience I am reflecting upon. The impetus for this chapter was an invitation from Dr. Glenn Finger to write and present an account of my doctoral journey as part of a symposium presentation at the two conferences mentioned previously.

Brown, Finger and Reeves (2007, p. 8), in their introduction to the book ‘Educational Research: Who Needs It?’ depict the educational journey of an RHD student as occurring in a community of practice in which ‘participants assist each other to become full participants in the research
culture of the community’. According to Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) a community of practice is ‘a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’. In broad terms such a community consists of four interrelated elements – knowing, doing, participation, and legitimacy. This perspective promotes a socio-cultural view of knowing as being ‘activity by specific people in specific circumstances’ (Brown, et al. 2007, p. 52). However, what this conception of participation and learning may not do is acknowledge the contested nature of social practices, participation in those practices and the bases by which individuals’ learning can be quite distinct from what the practice proposes. Whilst similarly based in the social constructivist domain, Activity Theory differs to a ‘communities of practice’ approach in relation to mediation by physical and conceptual tools. Activity Systems further defines this mediation via an emphasis on the Division of Labour and Communal Rules which govern the interaction between elements of a particular social context. The mediation of these elements is a critical component of the RHD experience and therefore a brief synopsis of Activity Theory and Activity Systems is required.

ACTIVITY THEORY: A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Activity Theory is a body of theorising and research initiated in 1920’s and 1930’s by the founders of the cultural-historical school of Russian psychology, Lev Vygotsky and Alexie Leont’ev (Engeström, Miettinen & Punamaki, 1999). Activity theory is an approach that aims to understand individual human beings in their natural, daily circumstances. This understanding occurs through an analysis of the genesis, structure, and processes of their activities. In defining Activity, Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the individual, Leont’ev (1981) emphasises the individual in activity, and Engeström (1987), who advocates a version of Activity Theory which he refers to as Activity Systems, emphasises the individual within an activity system. Regardless of the emphasis, human activity is always oriented to the achievement of goals and motives (Nardi, 1996) and in this sense activity implies an action done in order to transform some object (Engeström, 1999). Activity is understood as a purposeful interaction of the subject with the world, a process in which mutual transformations between the poles of ‘subject–object’ are accomplished (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).
Engeström reconceptualised the primary Activity Theory heuristic from the simple subject-tools-object triangle into a six element model (Figure 1) which has become an analytical tool used in a wide range of concrete research (e.g. Gordon, 2006; Romeo & Walker, 2002; Lloyd & Cronin, 2002).

Figure 1. An Activity System (Engeström, 1987, p. 37)

Minimum elements of this system include the object, subject, mediating artifacts (signs and tools), rules, community, and division of labour (Sharpe, 2003). Engeström's (1987) framework provides a schematic for the structure of activity which can then be used to examine the various socio-cultural elements which impact upon the relationship between the individual and the community. In this schema, the most basic relations are a subject (person) oriented to accomplishing some object (outward goal, concrete purpose, or objectified motive) using a historically-constructed tool. To this initial triangular relationship, community is added, generating two more links; a subject relates to the community via rules (norms, conventions); and the community relates to the object via division of labour, defined as the organisation of processes related to the attainment of a communal goal (Roschelle 1998). The mechanism for growth and development for individuals and the community in an activity system is the resolution of contradictions which potentially lead to transformations and expansions within the system. According to Kuutti (1996), a contradiction is a misfit within elements, between elements, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity. Contradictions exist when external influences change elements of activities causing
imbalances between them. Consequently, Activity Systems are almost always in flux as they work through contradictions which manifest themselves as problems, ruptures, breakdowns, or clashes (Scanlon & Issroff, 2005). By way of example, in the university context, a potential contradiction is the view of students to be educated versus students to make a profit from.

The purpose of this section has been to briefly explain Activity Theory, and in particular, Engeström’s Activity Systems. This is necessary as Activity Systems provides a theoretical scaffold for the explication of my journey. Readers who are interested in a more detailed synthesis of Activity Theory, particularly as it relates to educational research, can refer to a second paper presented at the 2008 RHD conference entitled Activity Theory: A tool for classroom based research investigating laptop use in a middle school context: Theoretical and methodological perspectives (Larkin, 2008).

TRACING THE RHD JOURNEY: THE VIEW FROM A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

The socio-cultural context for my RHD is Griffith University. It has, as a key object, the transformation of society through the creation of knowledge and it provides meaning to the various goals of individuals operating within this context. In order to understand my particular subjectivities within this system I have, for the purpose of initial conceptualisation, diagrammatically summarised perspectives of my journey via the use of three interconnected Activity sub-Systems – namely System One - Attainment of Doctoral Qualification (See Figure 2), System Two - Academic Career Trajectory (See Figure 3), and System Three - EPS (Gold Coast) Research Community (Figure 4). Each of my Activity Systems, which are in essence sub-systems of the larger Griffith University Activity System, have specific goals which are sometimes congruent with, and at other times divergent from, the overall goals of the university’s Activity System. Prior to discussing each system in specific terms a number of global considerations need further clarification.

The first consideration is that the three systems, whilst depicted as separate, are in reality inter-related in such a way that the same or similar activities are completed simultaneously in multiple systems – for instance, a piece of writing might be a compulsory assignment in the EdD Coursework required at System One, and also a conference paper contributing to the research culture of EPS at System Three. Activities within these systems are therefore multifaceted and often can only distinguished by their underlying,
and sometimes unseen, motives. Using the previous example, the assignment may be written with the overt motive of passing a course but with the additional goals of later presentation at a conference; or with the intent of eliciting positive responses and resultant social capital from supervisors and the wider academic community.

The second key consideration is that these systems are not linear. I am concurrently positioned in Systems One, Two and Three and my positioning is fluid according to the subjectivities I choose to employ. Brown, et al. (2007) emphasise this point using the concepts of ‘voice’ and ‘epistemology’. In their book chapter, these authors use the abstracts, conference papers, and later book chapters of RHD students as their dataset and attempt to distinguish where the authors of these papers are located in relation to their RHD journey in terms of ‘peer’, ‘student’, or ‘educator’. In explaining the three positionalities, using the activity systems terminology of Rules and Division of Labour, I ‘officially’ belong at university in System One as a university student subject to the specific roles and responsibilities which accompany my delineation as student. In System Two I complete activities (tutoring, writing, presenting) which mediate my progress towards the System Two goal of an academic position. Finally, I am also temporarily a ‘peer’ operating within System Three and contributing to the research output of the EPS Community.

It is important to note that the examination of only these three systems does not infer that I am not also involved in many other systems – e.g. Marymount Primary School System, Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) System, and the Queensland Society for Information Technology in Education (QSITE) System. The three systems presented here have been selected for emphasis as they are directly related to the topic in question – namely the RHD journey and issues of voice, membership, and authorship.

The third and final consideration relates to my depiction of ‘tool’ use. In terms of my particular systems, tool use refers primarily to mental models, paradigms, and semiotic signs as opposed to primarily referring to tools as primarily physical tools which occurs in many studies utilising an Activity Systems framework (e.g. Elks, 2005; Dale, 2003; Gordon, 2006). Whilst not negating the use of powerful tools e.g. laptops, online environments, and databases, my conceptualisation of tool use relates more closely to that of Vygotsky (1978) who conceived of tools as including language, semiotics, signs and symbols. In this sense, academic credentials, publications, and conference presentations are examples of the mental tools I utilise to mediate the relationship between subject (myself) and various objects (completion of EdD, academic career, contributor to research culture) in the attainment of the overall motive of the three systems – namely knowledge generation and
social transformation. The three considerations discussed in this section underpin my subsequent analysis of the three specific systems which are used as a framework for explaining the influence of a variety of socio-cultural elements on my particular career trajectory.

**SYSTEM ONE - EDD**

System One (Figure Two) has as its motive the Attainment of Doctoral Qualification. The key elements of this system are indicated in Table One below.

*Table One: Major Elements of System One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object (Goal)</th>
<th>Completion of coursework / thesis; reception of EdD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>Doctoral student; supervisor(s); Head of School; external reviewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>Course Outlines; Policy Documents; Blackboard; Workshops; and Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Griffith University; EPS (Gold Coast); GIER; RHD Students; Professional Bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Academic Conventions; Ethical Clearance; Confirmation Seminar; Government Regulations (Funding / Priorities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labour</td>
<td>Doctoral Student; Supervisor(s); Academic Advisors; Examiners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

System One is characterised by clearly defined Rules and Division of Labour. The rules for thesis completion e.g. length, duration of study, and confirmation requirements, are clearly set out in numerous university documents and are communicated regularly with students. Likewise, guidelines regarding the roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors are clearly described. At this point in the journey, tensions may arise between student and supervisor(s). Examples of these possible tensions include differences of theoretical perspectives between student and supervisor(s); differences of expectations in relation to publishing during the doctoral program; coursework related issues; or variations in confirmation and thesis expectations across different disciplines. In my personal RHD journey, System One has been, apart from the ever present tension that exists between my full time work and my doctoral commitments, free of many of the tensions noted above. My relationships with my supervisors and other academics have been largely productive and beneficial to me as a student.
System One primarily intersects with System Two in relation to the systemic element of ‘tool use’. As indicated previously, tools are predominantly conceptualised in this chapter as mental constructs. In this instance, the doctoral qualification gained at System One becomes a tool which is used to assist in the attainment of the immediate object of System Two - an academic career. The reception of a doctoral qualification is the end of the RHD journey. Its usefulness, however, continues into System Two and Three, albeit at a more subtle level. Depending on the motivation of the particular student, the reception of an EdD may also be an integral step in becoming a School Principal; a Senior Educational Officer; or an Educational Consultant. The resultant use of the doctoral qualification is clearly dependent on the overarching motive of the subject who receives the qualification and it is in this context that the qualification becomes a ‘tool’ which mediates a multitude of possible outcomes. The tool remains the same but the use of the tool differs markedly according to the motive of the subject.

Many of the activities described at System One will reoccur, some simultaneously, at System Two and System Three. My activities at System One lead both to the object of System One (EdD qualification) but also to the
objects of System Two (Academic Career) and System Three (Research Culture). By way of example, I was required during the coursework component of the course to submit assignments – at System One, various lecturers, marked my assignments and provided a university grade; at System Two, with the help of my supervisors, these assignments became additions to my publications record and my professional resume; and at System Three these assignments were again reworked and became conference papers and presentations thus contributing to the research output of my particular school.

In my context, the completion of a thesis will provide the key tool to be utilised at a later stage in the attainment of an academic position; it will also ‘label’ the subject (me) at least in terms of pre-requisite qualifications, as a Doctor of Education. The attainment of this qualification has implications for my subjectivities at System Two and System Three in relation to Rules, Division of Labour and Community Membership and these implications are explored in the analysis section of this chapter.

**SYSTEM TWO – ACADEMIC CAREER**

System Two (Figure Three) has as its motive the attainment of an Academic position. The key elements of this system are indicated in Table Two below.

*Table Two: Major Elements of System One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object (Goal)</th>
<th>Work as a full time academic – (teaching, researching, writing, and community partnerships)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>Qualified Researcher; Casual Tutor; GAET Winner; School Deputy; Colleague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>EdD Qualification; Publications; AARE Symposium; RDH Conferences; GAET Award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>EPS (Gold Coast); Wider Gold Coast Educational Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Contractual; EdD vs. PHD (Philosophy on relative worth); Academic Culture; RQF; GU Priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labour</td>
<td>Peers; Co-Researchers; Editors; Mentors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

System Two is the most complex of all of the systems as I am positioned in System Two in a multitude of ways, RHD student, casual academic tutor, school based educator, writer, competitor, presenter. The negotiation of these subjectivities, via Rules and Division of Labour in an Activity System sense, and via Member Categorisation in a more interpersonal, subjective sense, is the critical component of my RHD journey.
Whilst System One was characterised by clearly defined Division of Labour and Rules, System Two is more loosely constructed. In terms of Division of Labour, I am solely responsible for activities within this system which pertain to the attainment of an academic career. The university is not required to provide human or material support as the ‘contractual agreement’ which existed in System One, whereby supervisors and lecturers were appointed to assist me and where government accountabilities needed be met, is no longer a mandated requirement. There is no clearly delineated set of rules which govern how I attain my object nor are there any university requirements that I proceed any further with ‘academia’ after the attainment of the doctoral degree.

Whilst limited ‘official’ university rules exist at System Two (academic writing, ethics, etc), tensions still arise within this system in relation to the sometimes explicit but often tacit rules of the EPS (Gold Coast) community, particularly as they relate to career trajectories. In meeting the key prerequisites for academic employment the stated ‘rules’ are that (amongst other criteria) a doctoral qualification and a publications record is required. These overt employment stipulations belie the tacit realities of
the system which impact on my objective to become an academic; e.g. is an EdD ‘worth’ the same as a PhD; in which journals will my work be published; what impact will these publications have; is my thesis equivalent to other thesis; or which research group am I associated with. These realities are ones that have caused me much reflection – particularly the discourse around the EdD / PhD and much pondering has occurred as to whether I should ‘upgrade’ my EdD to a PhD. It is only recently that I decided to complete the EdD rather than switch to a PhD.

Both System One and System Two become integrated with System Three at the systemic element of the subject. As was the case with System Two, I am positioned in this system in a multitude of roles – tutor, RHD student, author, school based person, and hopefully, at some stage, future academic. System Three provides the overarching socio-cultural context which both shapes and is shaped by my activity at System One and Two. System Three is the system which Brown, et al. (2007) are referring to in their chapter as the EPS (Gold Coast) Community of Practice. Elements of this Community of Practice, which I have expressed as elements in an Activity System, are outlined below.

**SYSTEM THREE – EPS (GOLD COAST)**

System Three (Figure Four) has as its motive the creation and transformation of knowledge. The key elements of this system are indicated in Table Three below.

*Table Three: Major Elements of System One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object (Goal)</th>
<th>Transformation of knowledge, research culture, academic membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>Academics, School Based Personnel, RHD Students, Authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>Teaching Programs, Publications, Community Events, RHD Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>EPS – Gold Coast, Griffith University, Australian / World Educational Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>RQF, GU Priorities, Economics, EPS - Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labour</td>
<td>Academics, Research Groups, GIER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tensions within this system, as was the case in System Two, again revolve primarily around Rules and Divisions of Labour but with different emphasis. Whilst tensions are evident in relation to Rules, the EPS tensions
are, by and large, similar to those tensions which effect most schools within Griffith University and, I expect, the majority of Australian Universities. They revolve around the Research Quality Framework (RQF), Government Funding Arrangements, Industrial Awards, Publishing Criteria, Community Service and the like. Specific to Griffith University are the various research priorities as established by the Pro Vice Chancellor or individual Deans / Heads of School.

**Figure 4. System Three (EPS – Gold Coast)**

Division of Labour at System Three is unique to each individual school and therefore the tensions and opportunities I identify here are peculiar and particular to EPS (Gold Coast). Billett (2006) suggests that many of the tensions which are evident in workplaces result from variations in workplace affordances. Briefly stated, workplace affordances are ‘the kinds of activities that individuals are offered (afforded) as a result of the product of workplaces’ micro-social processes, that is, the exercise of the norms and practices’ (Billett, 2006, p. 60). EPS affordances include allocation of office space and secretarial support, publishing opportunities, or the offer of limited tutoring or contract positions. As workplaces are shaped by hierarchies of control, official and non-official groups, personal
relationships and cultural practices, the distribution of such affordances reflect political and power relationships (Billett, 2006) and impact differently across place, space and time.

Workplace affordances are dynamic and are subject to constant change in terms of tasks, goals, interactions, participants and relations. This dynamism is reflected in the various Division of Labour emphases in the three systems in which I am a subject but they are equally as dynamic within each individual system. Importantly for my academic journey, these inter-psychological processes (Vygotsky, 1978) negate a concept of a fixed cognitive legacy in terms of a Community of Practice and instead indicate that my personal and academic transformation is a negotiated, on-going, intrapersonal, enterprise. From an Activity Systems perspective, tensions in a system are not, by definition, negative as they can provide the impetus for resolution, expansion and transformation.

As a means of demonstrating some of the tensions that I have identified, and simultaneously illustrating some key points of my journey, the current activity, i.e. the preparation of the AARE paper, upon which this book chapter is based, and its presentation at the 2008 RHD and AARE conferences, will now be analysed. Table Four summarises the three systems and indicates some key tensions which have been identified previously. Reflecting upon the experience of preparing a paper for the 2008 conferences, and upon my RHD journey overall, it is apparent that the key tensions in these systems are those which mediate my individual experience of the EPS Community of Practice in terms of fluctuating levels of ‘membership’.
Table Four – Tensions and Transformations Evident in RHD and AARRE Conference Presentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity System</th>
<th>Tensions and Transformations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System One - EdD</td>
<td>Deputy vs. Student (Absence / distraction from primary employment is always underlying tension)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctoral Student vs. Future Academic (Presentation of paper not central to System One Object)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Positive - Further develop understanding of AT and AS - (Thesis conceptual framework)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Enhances relationship between Supervisor / Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Negative - detracts from EdD tasks e.g. confirmation seminar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Two – Academic Career</td>
<td>Deputy vs. Potential Academic (Absence / distraction from primary employment is always underlying tension)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No tension as presentation of paper directly related to System Two Object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enhances relationship between Supervisor / Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Three – EPS – Community of Practice</td>
<td>Deputy vs. EPS Membership (Absence / distraction from primary employment is always underlying tension)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation of paper directly related to System Three Object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tension returns re (partial / temporary) membership of EPS community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Invitation to be part of the EPS community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor / Student relationship re-negotiated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The articulation of my RHD journey thus far, via the use of Activity Systems, has provided an account of how the various system elements in which I am involved are inter-related and how they have influenced my particular RHD journey. They can be likened, in a sense, to a list of chess moves which readers can follow to determine an outcome…. Nd6 Re1+ 34. Kh2 Nxf2 35. Nxf7+ Kg7 36. Ng5+ Kh6 37. Rxh7+ 1-0 (for chess buffs, these are the final moves of the famous 1997 chess match between Deep Blue and Kasparov). Although mentioned briefly, what is still absent from an Activity Systems account of my doctoral journey is a clear picture of what makes my journey unique. This omission is a partial consequence of the lack of emphasis on the Subject in Activity Systems conceptualisations. This omission is recognised by numerous authors in their critique of Engeström’s Activity Systems (see for instance, Valsiner, 2000; Billett, 2003 / 2006;
Wheelahan, 2004; Daniels, 2008). These authors believe that, in attempting to explicate the influence of the system on the individual, the individual has in fact become ‘over socialised’ and become depicted as merely a representation of the society in which they live. Tolman (1999, p. 82) assumes a more extreme position and argues that Activity Theory posits the individual as ‘society’s gift where the individual is society manifested in a single organism’.

In my view, arguments which debate the exact nature of the individual – social dichotomy are useful from an ontological and epistemological standpoint but are not particularly helpful in a practical context and therefore a different perspective is required. As Valsiner & Van der Veer (2000) emphasised, the distinction between natural (individual) and cultural (social) development is a conceptual, theoretical one, and in actual practice the two lines can hardly be distinguished. My contribution towards this synthesis is presented in Larkin (2008) where a way forward is proposed which suggests that arguing for a dichotomy between the individual and the social is neither philosophically justified nor productive. A preliminary model is proposed which positions the subject centrally in a socio-cultural context and indicates that individual agency is an integral factor in determining the influence of systemic elements on an individual’s life trajectory. This model also suggests that the relationship between the individual and the social world should be considered along relational rather than dialectical lines. See also Valsiner and Van der Veer (2000) and Billett (2006).

AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALISATION OF MY ACADEMIC WORLD

In reconceptualising my RHD journey I propose a new model (Figure Five) - The Academic World of the Author – An Activity Systems and Membership Categorisation Perspective. This model utilises both an Activity Systems approach, which affords powerful examination of the structural elements of my journey, i.e. Tools, Community, Division of Labour and Rules, and also the more ontogentic approach afforded by the use of Membership Categorisation (Baker, 1997) which emphasises personal, individual, agentic action in mediating my relationship with the systemic elements mentioned above. As indicated earlier in this chapter, these systems are contextualised as occurring within the broader Griffith University Activity System.
Membership Categorisation theorises the role of active subjects and active subjectivities and suggests that individual subjects choose from a range of roles according to the particular context in which they find themselves. How people describe themselves and how they reason about their actions are pragmatic selections from a range of possible category identifications, e.g. an individual may identify as a ‘father’ a ‘teacher’ or a ‘researcher’ and then describe their activity based on such identifications. Each may be correct identifiers of the same person but the selection made calls on very different domains of knowledge and reason (Baker, 1997).

In initial iterations of this model, I represented my academic journey with three linear, sequential, interconnected systems. This is the common configuring of systems, based on Engeström’s systems model, and evidenced in the work of Elks (2005), and Suratmethakul (2005). From this perspective, a system is a subset of another system which in turn is a subset of a further system and so on. Whilst initially satisfied with the depiction of my journey in terms of these linear systems, the more I reflected on my journey, the clearer it became to me that such a sequentialisation, although neatly articulated, did not adequately reflect either the convoluted nature of the various elements of the systems or the fact that I choose to exhibit, or am categorised as, various subjectivities across each system. Figure Five represents the current conceptualisation of my journey and seeks to depict the
significant individual agency I exert in choosing the nature of my involvement across the various systemic stages. This model utilises both Activity Systems and Membership Categorisation perspectives. It overcomes the potential de-personalisation of this journey which occurred when only a systems approach was used, and establishes personal relevance via the utilisation of Membership Categorisation. In so doing I recognise that my individual identities and subjectivities shape my agentic action within a specific selection of systems.

This model illustrates that I interact with the elements of my particular systems in a unique way and that this uniqueness arises from the distinct and individual pathway which constitutes my individual ontogeny (Billett, 2006). Thus I am simultaneously a researcher, peer, tutor, author, or student. The recognition that subjects can be active in the pursuit of their goals mitigates the potential over-socialisation of the individual. Without an understanding that individuals make individual choices based on their ontogeny, the subject in a system can become merely a representation of a conglomerate of subjects, in other words, I become a ‘RHD student’; or a ‘university tutor’; or ‘an author’. Whilst these labels are useful for managing relationships within the community, in terms of Rules or Division of Labour, they are unable to reveal the granular nature of any particular, individual journey.

To clarify this point I would like to reflect on two subjectivities, which I have adopted in my journey, ‘becoming a peer’ and ‘becoming an author’. Both these subjectivities form part of a tapestry of experiences that are identified and investigated by Brown, et al. (2007) as they determine the epistemological stance being constructed by the authors of the different papers initially presented at the 2006 Educational Research: Who Needs It? Conference. By investigating where the various authors located their reported research i.e. within a research paradigm / methodology; within an educational debate; or within a policy shift / dilemma – Brown, et al. (2007) endeavoured to determine where individual RHD students positioned their work and in so doing gain an insight into the positioning of the authors in relation to the research community of practice, using the descriptors of ‘peer’, ‘student’ or ‘educator’.

The three categories used by Brown, et al. (2007) reflect three likely subjectivities within a RHD journey; ‘peer’ depicts an individual with a substantial publications record and the successful completion of a thesis ‘just around the corner’; ‘student’ depicts an individual somewhere along the journey but predominantly still situated, like a ‘peer’ within an academic community of practice; ‘educator’ depicts an individual most likely completing a professional doctorate, and predominantly situated, unlike the
‘peer’ and ‘student’, in a school context and thus studying part-time. My journey reflects elements of each of these positionings and, whilst my journey has roughly followed the suggested course of educator – student – peer, these stages are often in a state of flux. Throughout the first year of my study, I most closely identified myself as a school based educator and this was reflected in my early writing which was highly contextualised and primarily descriptive of my school based practice. However, over the last two years I have begun to categorise myself as ‘doctoral student’ who, whilst meeting the requirements of the EdD course structure, is also writing academic articles which articulate a strong epistemological position and therefore reflect the category of ‘peer’; e.g. this book chapter and also a journal article to be submitted for publication towards the end of 2009. Always present in my journey on both an ontological and practical level is my identity as teacher / educator – primarily in a school based context and secondarily as a university tutor.

Brown, et al. (2007, p. 15) also reflect on the value of providing opportunities for authorship, such as those mentioned previously, for RHD students

Providing students with access to mature sites of research practice, such as conferences and book publications that lay outside of the thesis writing process, may be beneficial in assisting students to change the ways in which they relate to the research community of practice.

The opportunity to publish a book chapter in 2007 was a critical juncture in my journey. At an intrapersonal level, it led me to understand that perhaps I could belong to the academic community and that I was not a pretender, an impostor, or merely a student skilled at presenting work that my lecturers would rate highly. At a creative level, it was the first time that I had written something that would later become part of the broader academic community, and read (hopefully) by someone other than a person marking my work. In this context the activity of writing this initial academic paper represents an example of what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as ‘perezhivanie’, the emotional experience of an individual engaged in meaningful activity. The publishing of my academic work was an example of the intersection of me as ‘student’ with me as ‘author’. Whilst I will hopefully publish many academic papers they may not capture the same level of emotional experience as occurred following my initial, successful publication. The experience of ‘authorship’ was, therefore, a pivotal moment in my
development as an ‘academic in waiting’ and I am very excited, at the prospect of again publishing my own work.

The publication of my book chapter in 2007 indicated a move into the community of published academic authors and consequently membership, albeit minor, of the research community of practice. It did not, however, alter my membership of the Gold Coast EPS community of practice where I still position myself, and believe I am also positioned, as ‘outsider’. The paradox of both membership, and at the same time, non-membership can be illustrated by way of example – the successful attainment of a teaching degree results in a graduand becoming a recognised member of the community of teachers, however, only significant involvement in a particular school can engender a sense of membership of a particular community of practice. The core tension evident here, in my specific context, is that although my publications afford me membership of the ‘global’ community of researchers, I cannot become an authentic member of a specific, localised, community of practice in any meaningful sense until I become an actual member of the specific community via an official process. This particular tension in my journey is yet to be resolved.

In sharing my journey I am conscious that the words I have used, and the models that I have created, can only but paint an incomplete picture of the RHD experience. Mendelssohn is quoted as saying that his music expresses ‘not thoughts that are too vague to be put into words but too precise’ (Seaton, 2001, p. 6). Whilst certainly not claiming the eloquence of Mendelssohn, attempting to concisely articulate the personal dimensions of my journey with words has been a similarly daunting task. Denzin in (Miller & Glassner, 1997, p. 101) recognises that

A ‘subject’ is more than can be contained in a text, and a text is only a reproduction of what the subject has told us. Language, which is our window into the subject’s world [and our world], plays tricks. It displaces the very thing it is supposed to represent, so that what is always give is a trace of other things, not the thing – lived experience – itself

The purpose of this chapter has been an attempt to describe, using words and models, a complex and intimate journey of self-awareness, self-learning and self-discovery. It has argued that Activity Systems is an appropriate theoretical construct for an initial and generic exploration of the interconnected elements of such a journey, particularly in relation to Rules, Division of Labour and Community and also illustrated that the resolution of tensions within these systems provide opportunities for individual and
communal transformation. More crucially, the chapter has identified that an Activity System approach alone does not clearly identify or communicate the individual subjectivities which are present in each unique RHD journey. A new model was suggested which remains coherent with an Activity Systems framework and at the same time expresses the range of subjectivities that an individual utilises in daily interactions within various systems. Further developments of this initial concept, in collaboration with Brown and Finger, will examine whether this model is useful in analysing the RHD experience of other students. In closing, my as yet unfinished doctoral journey has been the most difficult cognitive challenge I have yet encountered. In presenting my journey, via the conceptual frameworks of Activity Systems and Membership Categorisation, it is hoped that a greater insight can be gained by the reader into their own story, and their own academic journey.
REFERENCES


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