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“The Consequences of “Community”: Contesting the Future of Higher Education”

I Problematic Nature of “Community”

“Community is very much in fashion. It is warm, caring, and nobody knows what it means.”
—Adam Swift

Problems with Defining “Community”—Dispute, Opposition, Imagination, and Process

“The sociological content of community has remained a matter for endless dispute...there is no clear and widely accepted definition of just what characteristic features of social interaction constitute the solidaristic relations typical of so-called communities.”

—The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology

“*Community* can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it seems never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.”

—Raymond Williams

“We start with the assumption that community should be viewed as a process involving social structure and cultural behavior...With this focus we seek those irregularities in their relationships among individuals that are revealed in their activities with each other and with the physical items in their environment. From the analysis of these data come the designation of systems and the further search for principles which explain their variation and change.”

—Arensberg and Kimball

II “Community” in Rhetoric and Composition—Tension and Contact Zones

“Communities are “living creatures, nurtured and nourished by rhetorical discourse.”

Communities are faced with a similar tension: “defining their own, distinctive identities and relating productively to those outside the group.”

—J. Michael Hogan

A contact zone is a social space “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power.”

—Mary Louise Pratt

III Activity Theory as Analytical Method

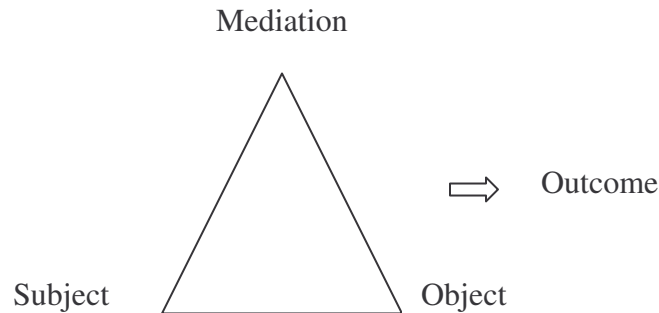
“Activity Theory is a set of related approaches that view human phenomena as dynamic, in action. Human-produced artifacts, such as utterances or texts, are not to be understood as objects in themselves, but within the activities that give rise and use to them. Their meanings are found in these dynamics of human interaction. The objects created and used in action then are studied as mediating artifacts rather than things in themselves, having rules of objects. The principles by which they are formed and maintained and changed are those of activity.”

—Russell and Bazerman

Brief Sketch of Activity Theory

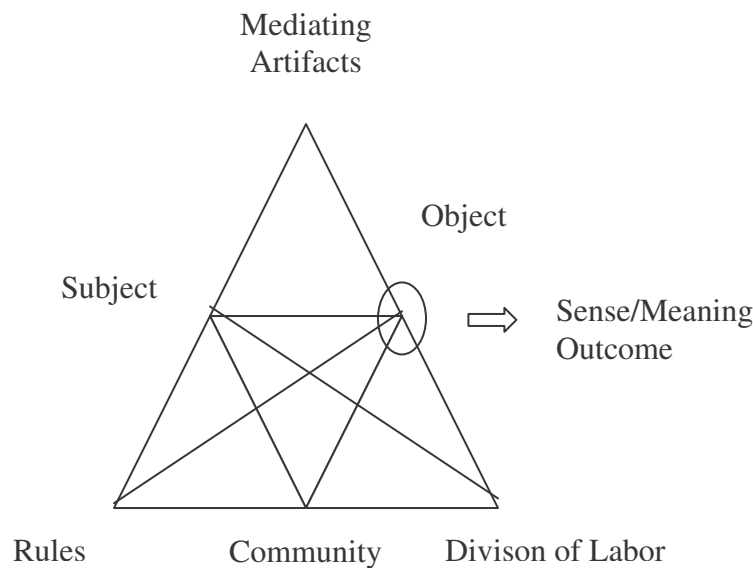
Three main “generations” of Activity Theory:

- **First Generation**—Ideas taken from Vygotsky’s concept of mediation, which unites artifact with action. *First Generation* AT often takes form following the basic structure:



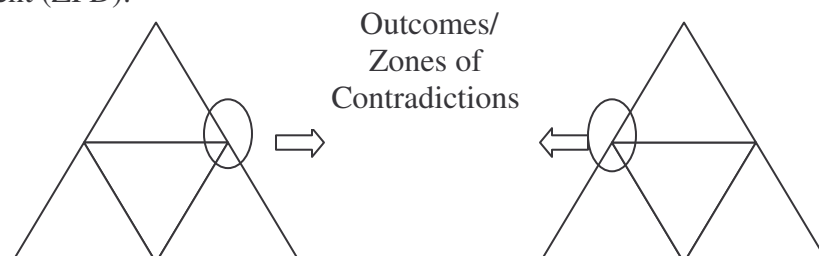
[Figure 1]

- **Second Generation**—Engeström’s extensions enabled focus on interrelationships between the individual subject and his or her community. *Second Generation* AT enables a richer examination of multiple relations.



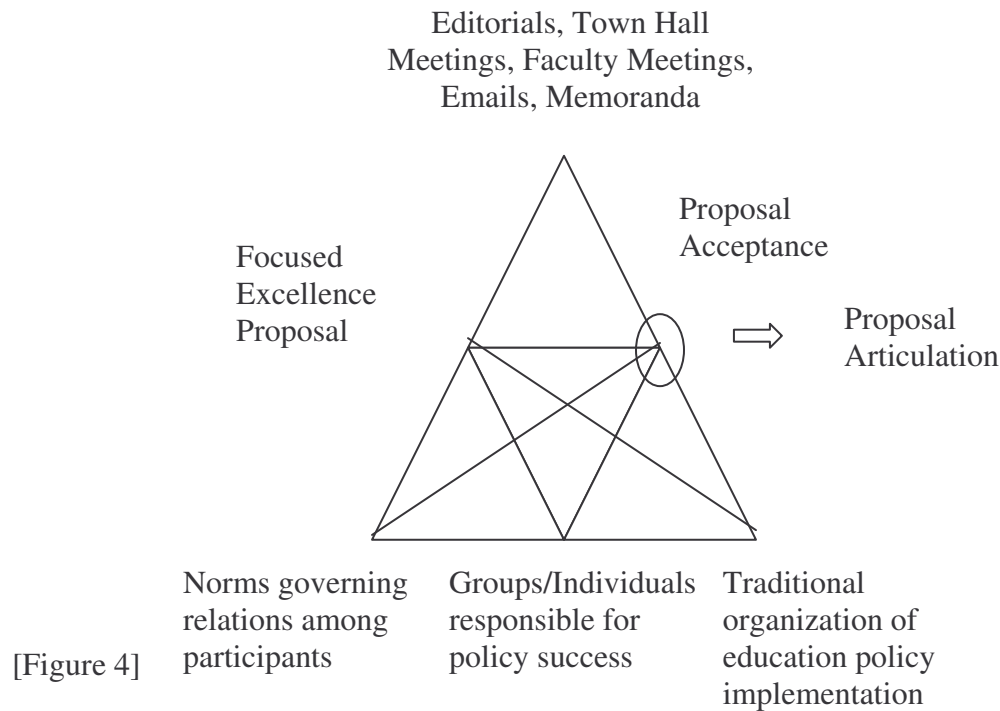
[Figure 2]

- **Third Generation**—Engeström (1999) further develops “conceptual tools” to interpret varying networks of interacting *activity systems*. The interactions reveal contradictions within on-going social practices and ultimately create change. Contradictions are “played out dialectically through ‘boundary work’ (renegotiation) in zones of proximal development (ZPD).”



[Figure 3]

IV Higher Education Case Study—*Focused Excellence*



Mediating Artifacts

- Editorials to local newspapers
- Series of Town-Hall meetings where members of the local community directly expressed their concerns
- ABOR meetings enabling invested parties to contest aspects of proposal
- Website detailing specifics of proposal, providing direct access to important documentation, and including comment boxes to encourage feedback
- Campus-wide emails, memoranda, bulletins further detailing proposals
- Student-addressed emails explaining issues
- One-on-one faculty discussions

Audiences Addressed/ Voices Heard

- National audience (editorials, webpage)
- Local community (Tucson and university editorials, webpage, meetings)
- University community Directly affected colleges/ departments
- Faculty (meetings, memos)
- Staff (memos, bulletins)
- Students (specific memos, newspaper articles)

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