MEDIATION AND AGENCY

Yrjö Engeström
University of Helsinki
Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research

STRUCTURE OF THE TALK

• 1. DUALISM AND MONISM IN ACTIVITY
• 2. INSTRUMENTALITIES OF MEDIATION
• 3. AGENCY THROUGH RE-MEDIATION
DUALISM AND MONISM IN ACTIVITY

SEPARATION AND JUXTAPOSITION OF INSTRUMENTAL AND SEMIOTIC ACTIVITY IN BŒDKER & ANDERSEN (2005)

• "COMMUNICATION IS MUCH MORE INDIRECT THAN INSTRUMENTAL ACTIONS: YOU CAN FORCE THE NAIL INTO THE WOOD BUT YOU CANNOT SIMILARLY FORCE AN OPINION INTO YOUR CONVERSATION PARTNER: A CHANGE OF OPINION IS A CHOICE THE LISTENER MAKES ON HIS OR HER OWN." (Bœdker & Andersen, 2005, p. 362)

• HABERMASIAN DUALISM BETWEEN INSTRUMENTAL AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITY
• FORGETS THAT OBJECTS RESIST AND HAVE THEIR OWN LIVES - WE NEED DIALOGUE WITH NATURE, NOT FORCING
• AND YOU CAN FORCE YOUR OPINION ONTO YOUR CONVERSATION PARTNER WHEN YOU HAVE THE INSTITUTIONAL RULES AND RESOURCES BEHIND YOU: WHEN THE JUDGE PRONOUNCES YOU GUILTY, YOU ARE GUILTY FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES
THE BASIC DUALISM OF INSTRUMENTAL AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITY IN BŒDKER & ANDERSEN (2005, p. 363)

INSTRUMENTAL ACTIVITY (BŒDKER & ANDERSEN, 2005, p. 367)
AGAINST DUALISM

- Separation and juxtaposition of two activities is dualism - it is alien to the foundational monism of Chat.
- Activities are identified by their objects, not by their mediational means.
- Different mediational means always act in concert in real activities.
- Vygotsky’s observation that tools are oriented to external objects and signs to human beings is valid - but it does not make signs “more indirect” or “higher” than tools.
- Tool/sign shifts and transitions are essential to all activities.
Drafting Agency
How does a Pen Mediate Collective Design Work?
Ulla-Maaria Mutanen, Ulla-maaria.mutanen@helsinki.fi

TRANSCRIPT

1  M2: I refer to that thin metal part which was bended from here like this and this and this, so I would put it there.

PHYSICAL MOVEMENTS

M2 draws his idea on the flipchart.
M2->stretcher on the flipchart:
Marker as a tool for changing the representation of the stretcher.

M1

M3

M2
15 M3: Can we not join it some way... it is probably not an expensive thing anymore... that kind of cast part. Then we just work it from inside "taps zinc" and then we put the Ritz's sheet metal composition there. There it is.

16 M1: So can you say what would come inside of it...

M3 gesticulates in explaining the form of the cast part.

M1 looks and points at the flipchart
M1->M3 Finger-pointing as a sign: “Draw it for us, please”

17 M3: You see, this wouldn't probably be so expensive anymore...

M1 puts his hand in the back of his head.
M3 stands up and starts explaining. At the same time M2 lifts the marker in the air at M3’s reach. On his way to flipchart, M3 grabs the marker from M2’s hand.

M2->M3: Marker as a sign: “Your turn. The floor is yours.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18</th>
<th>M3: so that one... just this spot here ... (discussion continues)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M3 moves the marker on the whiteboard. M3-&gt;all. Sign: “just this spot here”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M3 goes back to his seat and places the marker on the table in front of his colleagues on his left. M3-&gt;M1,M2,M4. Sign: “Your turn”.</td>
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**INTERDEPENDENCE OF SIGN AND TOOL**

- IT IS NOT TRIVIAL THAT EVEN WHEN THE MARKER PEN WAS USED AS A SIGN, IT HAD THE MATERIALITY OF THE MARKER PEN - AN EXTENSION OF THE HUMAN FINGER

- THE MEANING OF A SIGN IS NOT INDEPENDENT OF THE SHAPE AND USES OF ITS MATERIAL CARRIER
MONISM, NOT DUALISM: SUPERIMPOSITION OF MEDIATIONAL LAYERS, NOT JUXTAPOSITION OF DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES

THE ACTIVITY SYSTEM

UTTERANCE AS MEDIATED ACTION
(Ritva Engeström, 1995, p. 200)

PRODUCTION OF MEANING
(Ritva Engeström, 1995, p. 201)
INSTRUMENTALITIES OF MEDIATION

INSTRUMENTALITY

• THE RICH AND DIVERSE CONSTELLATION OF MEDIATING TOOLS AND SIGNS IN AN ACTIVITY SYSTEM MAY BE CALLED INSTRUMENTALITY
• THE NOTION EMPHASIZES BOTH INSTRUMENTS AND MENTALITY
• INSTRUMENTALITY INCLUDES THE USES OF THE BODY --- AND LANGUAGE
• ONE WAY TO LOOK AT THE MENTALITY IS TO IDENTIFY WAYS IN WHICH PRACTITIONERS ASK AND ANSWER EPISTEMIC QUESTIONS IN THEIR ACTIVITY
General Practitioner: ...And here is the whole range of different types of diagnoses and their connections that this lady has. As requested, I then prepared this care calendar, and I found it to be extremely good and helpful in representing the overall situation. May I present it next?

Researcher: Please do.

General Practitioner: So if we think about Rauni as a person, she has made a tremendous career abroad. And this is manifested in the list of diagnoses...
Basic algorithm for work with care agreements for patients with multiple long-term illnesses - this was made official in the City of Helsinki in October, 2002
AGENCY THROUGH REMEDIATION

“The person, using the power of things or stimuli, controls his own behavior through them, grouping them, putting them together, sorting them. In other words, the great uniqueness of the will consists of man having no power over his own behavior other than the power that things have over his behavior. But man subjects to himself the power of things over behavior, makes them serve his own purposes and controls that power as he wants. He changes the environment with the external activity and in this way affects his own behavior, subjecting it to his own authority.” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 212)
DOUBLE STIMULATION

• AGENTIC INTENTIONAL ACTION AND WILL EMERGE IN A CONTRADICTORY SITUATION (FIRST STIMULUS)
• INTENTIONAL ACTION HAS TWO PHASES: PREPARATION (OR DESIGN) AND EXECUTION
• PREPARATION IS DIFFICULT: A NEW MEDIATING ARTIFACT (TOOL/SIGN) IS INVENTED OR ADOPTED, IT IS INVESTED WITH MEANING SO THAT IT ENABLES ONE TO CONTROL ONE’S BEHAVIOR FROM THE OUTSIDE (SECOND STIMULUS)
• EXECUTION IS EASY; IT LOOKS ALMOST LIKE A CONDITIONED REFLEX

THE LEWIN EXPERIMENT

“In experiments involving meaningless situations, Lewin found that the subject searches for some point of support that is external to him and that he defines his own behavior through this external support. In one set of experiments, for example, the experimenter left the subject and did not return, but observed him from a separate room. Generally, the subject waited for 10-20 minutes. Then, not understanding what he should do, he remained in a state of oscillation, confusion and indecisiveness for some time. Nearly all the adults searched for some external point of support. For example, one subject defined his actions in terms of the striking of the clock. Looking at the clock, he thought: ‘When the hand moves to the vertical position, I will leave.’ The subject transformed the situation in this way, establishing that he would wait until 2:30 and then leave. When the time came, the action occurred automatically.” (Vygotsky, 1987a, p. 356)
CHEATING IN EXAMINATIONS

*I am currently analyzing a corpus of detailed accounts of cheating in crucial exams, reported by 268 Italian university students presently studying to become kindergarten and elementary school teachers

*Most of these students describe their cheating in the national high school final exam, which they characterize as an impossible test of memorizing excessive amounts of literature

OBSERVATION 1

*The preparation for cheating included careful selection, condensation and presentation of knowledge in written form - and at least equally careful construction of the physical artifacts on which the knowledge was inscribed, most commonly elaborate cheating belts and cheating slips
A cheating belt and cheating slips

Another cheating belt with cheating slips
• "We discussed with those who had already passed the exam previously. The common opinion was that if you have to pass the high school final exam, all you need is an ammunition belt (cartucciera). When I heard this word for the first time, I immediately thought about TV westerns with guns, rifles and everything needed for personal defense. But when my friends explained what this instrument is, I understood that my image of a gun was not so far from the truth: the cartucciera is really a weapon, a weapon against fear."

OBSERVATION 2

*The preparation was often extensive and involved the discovery and use of multiple sources of information beyond textbooks: Internet, library, encyclopedias, newspapers, television programs...

Several students describe this searching and synthesizing multiple sources of knowledge as a radical new opening in their approach to learning and studying.
"Everything became a field of search and deep study: books of literature, magazines, and newspapers. After a first collection of these materials, which at the beginning were really huge, I started making selections. In that I was guided by information from Internet web sites in which I could find day by day probable questions that might be posed in the exam. ... In addition to all this material, I had essays given to me by my friends who had done the exam earlier."

"I remember that I developed a notable capacity of synthesis, evaluation and discrimination. There were contents on which I had not focused in class. Suddenly in my synthesis they became clear ... I had a compact vision of the whole which I never had before in this subject. ...I still have my schematic written synthesis and it so happened that I returned to it in order to help my son in his school work on the law of Galileo. I was pretty pleased that I did not need a textbook of physics or other publications, just my own practical synthesis."
• "I found myself during long winter afternoons studying desperately in the municipal library. My parents were fascinated by this sudden sense of responsibility and saw in their little girl a new Levi Montalcini [an Italian female Nobelist in medicine] who would change the cultural face of the humankind."

OBSERVATION 3

*The preparation was typically done with the assistance of grandparents, mothers, fathers, siblings, and other relatives, with a strong presence of intergenerational and historical continuity
• "Older friends who had already graduated, my parents and family, and my relatives told me their experiences and gave me their points of view and suggestions. For instance, they gave me advice on which essays to put into the ammunition belt (cartucciera) and how to pull them out at the right moment, how to insert a table of contents into the cover page of the dictionary [the only tool students are allowed to have with them in the exam]...”

• "Imagine the scene; my mother thought it was a construction site: there were those who had legible and very small handwriting and copied the essays on very small paper slips, there were those who waited for the slips and folded them into harmonicas, there were those who cut the tissue and those who sewed the small pockets of tissue [for the ammunition belt], there were those who inserted the harmonica-like slips into the pockets, and those who prepared the list of numbered essays in order to facilitate the finding of the right one for an exam question. ... Involved in all these was also our neighbor, a teacher.”
OBSERVATION 4

*The quality and contents of the cheating slips objectify and make visible the student’s way of making sense of the task and, more generally, the student’s way of constructing knowledge

- there is good and bad cheating

• "I remember the nights I spent in the library of my grandmother looking for books on Italian literature old enough so that my teacher would not know them, so that I could copy entire paragraphs from them for the exam."

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OBSERVATION 5

*Several students mention that they actually did not need to use their cheating slips in the exam situation – it was sufficient that they had prepared them

• "I didn’t need it ... Copying so many times the rules on the small pieces of paper has been like engraving them in my mind, so the day of the exam it was much easier to face the essay question."

• "I didn’t have with me the right pre-written essay. But I immediately realized that all the searches and reading I did were not useless. I started making connections between authors and topics on which I had read.”
• "I literally faced the difficulty of the exam without using any of my supports. This was not only because of fear of being caught and expelled but because of the need to challenge myself after having studied so much and having prepared so much. During the preparation anxiety and agitation have been bigger than what I experienced on the day of the exam."

OBSERVATION 6

*The students describe their actions of cheating as a major struggle with their conscience, their fear, and their values. Almost without exception, they conclude that daring to prepare their elaborate cheating tools was a personal crisis and personal breakthrough into self-confidence and pride through the realization that what they did was not wrong – what was wrong was the system of education strangled by impossible and senseless memorizing exams and assessments.
• "While using my support material during the exam I realized that I was stealing nothing. What I was using was the result of my own work."

• "I knew I was not up to mastering autonomously such a complex task. No feeling of guilt interfered with my choice to cheat. I evaluated my choice and I found it an absolutely ingenious act."

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US ABOUT RE-MEDIATION AND AGENCY?

• RE-MEDIATING THE STUDYING ACTIVITY BY MEANS OF CHEATING SLIPS AND BELTS OPENED UP NEW ACTIONS OF FINDING, SYNTHESIZING, CONDENSING, INSCRIBING AND ORGANIZING KNOWLEDGE FROM DIVERSE SOURCES; THE VERY SCOPE OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE WAS RADICALLY WIDENED FOR MANY STUDENTS

• IT WIDENED THE CIRCLE OF PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE ACTIVITY OF STUDYING, TO INCLUDE GRANDPARENTS, PARENTS, SIBLINGS, OTHER RELATIVES, AND FRIENDS

• IT EXTENDED THE TEMPORAL TRAJECTORY OF LEARNING, IN MANY CASES TO COVER SEVERAL MONTHS OF PREPARATION

• IT HELPED STUDENTS FACE AND RESOLVE ISSUES OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY CONSCIOUSLY AND CRITICALLY, TO TAKE A RISK AND BREAK AWAY FROM THE CONFINES OF AN UNJUST AND SENSELESS SYSTEM