Relational Agency in Professional Practice: A CHAT Analysis

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Abstract. *Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a useful framework for examining learning to become a professional. This is particularly the case when professional practice is seen to be developed within specific institutional settings. However, new forms of practice are being required which call for a capacity to work with other practitioners and draw on resources that may be distributed across systems to support professional actions. In this paper the concept of relational agency is described and illustrated with reference to a series of research studies. It is argued that relational agency leads to an enhanced form of professional agency and that there are implications for the development of CHAT.*

Keywords: *Cultural Historical Activity Theory, professional learning, relational agency*

Relational agency involves a capacity to offer support and to ask for support from others…One's ability to engage with the world is enhanced by doing so alongside others. What the (women's) centre was doing was creating an open enough system for a fluid form of relational agency to emerge. The fluidity of such relationships is important as it was clear that they were not encouraging dependency and were encouraging a capacity to both seek and give help when engaging with the world. (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005, p. 294)

(Multi-agency collaboration) is only a matter of adjusting what you do to other people's strengths and needs. (Practitioner, England, 2005)

The Individual or the Collective?

One way of explaining the evolution of sociocultural and activity theory is to examine their different starting points (Chaiklin, 2001a; Edwards, 2005; Engeström, 1999). In simple terms, sociocultural psychology has developed out of North American and Western European concerns about the inherent separation of mind and world or self and context, to be found in interactionism. In Vygotsky's work on mediation and consciousness, some interactionists found a way of overcoming the dualism that they felt pervaded their accounts of development (Edwards, in press). Activity theory, on the other hand, finds its origins in the Russian notion of collective consciousness and a Marxist focus on the historical, social and economic foundations of thinking and acting (Chaiklin, 2001b; Kozulin, 1986). One outcome of attempts to build bridges between these two strands and to make collective accounts comprehensible to those who focus on individual development is to explain Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) in terms of the incorporation of the collective into the individual.

I would not disagree with that explanation. However, it calls for close attention to the processes of mediation and the development of consciousness. I think that there is still work to be done here, particularly when we are looking at how people work on new problems. Mediation was central to Vygotsky's thesis. His aim was to reveal the laws which enabled an explanation of how the external was first assimilated by the individual and then in turn enabled the organisation of an increasingly complex relationship with the external. The two parts of the process, internalisation and externalisation, are both important.

His analysis of how people become competent actors in their worlds is therefore worth explaining. Vygotsky identified what he termed "stimuli-means" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 84). These, he argues, are used to assist our performance. Stimuli-means may include, for example, a knot in a handkerchief to help us remember, a map, a gesture, a word, a rhyme, or a picture. They have in common that they are all cultural artefacts that are available to us as tools to assist our performance as actors in and on our worlds and to mediate what is culturally significant. They may be seen as resources which can turbo-charge our performance and we learn to use them with the help of others. For example, we learn that a picture can help us attend to a particular set of words. Ultimately these artefacts become, as A.N. Leont'ev put it, "ingrowing" (Leont'ev, 1997, p. 22). By that he meant that we begin to take control of and use the tools ourselves, for example, we might select and match pictures and words without help and then find we can operate without the pictures and use the words in other tasks.

For Vygotsky, the mediational function of these cultural tools and our control of them as stimuli meant that the mental processes themselves were changed. New mental structures, which allowed us to move beyond instinct and take control over our worlds, were produced. Importantly, Vygotsky's focus

was the change in the mental structures and not simply the performance. The formation of a new concept, he argued, was "qualitatively new" and "cannot be reduced to more elementary processes that characterise the development of the intellect at earlier stages" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 40). That is, the structure of the internal plane has been reconfigured and is then externalised in our actions on the world.

In brief, what is salient in a culture is not only incorporated into the new mental functions but is found in the ways in which the functions are formed and transformed and brought in to use. Put simply, our minds are formed by the ways of thinking and concepts in use that are available to us in our social worlds.

Vygotsky's emphasis on mediation has led to a range of ways of explaining the conditions under which mediation can occur. However, they tend to focus more in internalisation than externalisation. Lave and Wenger, for example, have described three versions of the zone of proximal development in which culture is mediated by others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They are as follows.

- A 'scaffolding' interpretation where the concern is to move the learner with help to a new understanding.
- A 'cultural' interpretation where the difference is seen in terms of the distance between everyday and scientific understandings which is bridged by instruction.
- A 'collectivist' or 'societal' interpretation, which highlights the difference between current understandings and new forms of collectively generated solutions to the contradictions embedded in current understandings.

The first two interpretations are located within pedagogical relationships and focus on internalisation of the culture we inhabit. The third version is more open-ended, deals with externalisation and allows for the generation of new understandings for new problems. However, because of its origins in the object-oriented activity theory of Leont'ev rather than the mediation-focused psychology of Vygotsky, changes in interpretation of the object are seen in terms of tension and contradictions within multi-voiced systems and not in the mediational relationships that exist in those systems. One challenge is to see how mediation can accompany externalisation

I am not suggesting, by the summary of CHAT I have just given, that the approach has been limited to a focus simply on either individual cognition or systemic change. Vygotsky and Leont'ev as well as later generations led by Wertsch among others have recognised the dialogical bases of human cognition. I am, however, suggesting that we need to look beyond the dialogues to the purposes and conditions of joint action. In the context of my work, that has included a focus on agentic action with others. This work has led to the idea of relational agency.

In the work I have been doing we have been looking at how people learn to

become confident decision-makers. The research has been located in the professional practices of teachers and other practitioners who work with children and young people and in places where socially disadvantaged adults learn to regain control over their own lives. In all of these settings learning is not simply a matter of learning pre-existing ideas. It is also a matter of learning how to interpret a problem embedded within social practices and to know how to respond to that problem.

In the rest of this paper I shall outline what I mean by relational agency and its current relevance. I shall then illustrate those arguments with examples from my own research. Finally I shall consider the implications of relational agency for understandings of professional learning and action and for the development of CHAT.

The Concept of Relational Agency

I have been working with the idea of relational agency over the last seven years in studies of teacher education, of the social inclusion of economically disadvantaged children and adults and more recently of the development of inter-professional collaboration. In brief, the concept is intended to capture a capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with those of others to interpret aspects of one's world and to act on and respond to those interpretations. In CHAT terms it is a capacity to work with others to expand the object that one is working on by bringing to bear the sense-making of others and to draw on the resources they offer when responding to that sense-making.

Relational agency therefore has some resonance with the work of Hakkarainen and his colleagues on reciprocity and mutual strengthening of competence and expertise to enhance the collective competence of a community (Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola, & Lehtinen, 2004). Where it differs is by focussing more directly on the nature of the relationships that comprise a network of expertise. It also connects with Billett's focus on relational interdependence (Billett, 2006), by arguing for greater attention to agency in explaining relationships between the individual and the social in working life. Like Billett, it recognises the importance of pre-existing personal understandings gained in other situations in mediating interpretations of new situations and argues for attention to the negotiations that individuals make as they work in and with the social.

It is also closely connected with the ideas of distributed intelligence and distributed expertise. Here the starting point for analysis is not individual cognition, but is instead the resources that are to be found outside the individual mind. It recognises that cultural tools, both material and representational, are loaded with intelligence which enhances our action.

Both concepts of distribution are helpful when planning for learning, as both help us to consider how learning might be supported. There is much to be learnt from studies of designing computer mediated learning environments

with regard to the distribution of tools (Clark, 1997; Light & Littleton, 1999; Pea, 1993). At a very basic level these studies remind us that learning environments can be designed so that we can draw easily on the intelligence located within tools and artefacts. Pea's 1993 paper, for example, represented an effort to move away from an over-reliance on interactional or social approaches to the support of learning and to see how intelligent artefacts can support action. However, distributed intelligence can also be seen as a resource distributed across people, as if stretched across systems, which is accessed by participants in the system. Bruner, in a similar vein, has talked about the extended intelligence of research labs (Bruner, 1996).

Distributed expertise can be seen as a sub-category of distributed intelligence which relates more directly to working practices. It raises questions about professional knowledge, team working, collaboration, professional boundaries and identities. It might be found across a cluster of distinct local services which are all oriented to supporting the well-being of young children in a neighbourhood. A particular version of distributed expertise is to be found in the systemic approaches to enhancing learning which have been developed by Engeström. Engeström and Middleton (1996), for example, describe a CHAT perspective on expertise as the "collaborative and discursive construction of tasks, solutions, visions, breakdowns and innovations" (p. 4) within and across systems rather than individual mastery of specific areas of relatively stable activity.

Relational agency, I suggest, helps us to understand the negotiations and reconfiguring of tasks indicated by Engeström and Middleton (1996). It occupies a conceptual space between a focus on learning as enhancing individual understanding and a focus on learning as systemic change and includes both. It fits squarely within CHAT readings of mind and world, by seeing mind as outward looking, pattern-seeking and engaged with the world (Greeno, 1997).

The argument, in summary, is that we transform the world through our actions upon it and these actions include the conceptual and material resources we bring to bear while trying to make sense of it (see Figure A). If action on

Mediational Tools and Artefacts

Acting Subject(s)   The Object that is Being Transformed
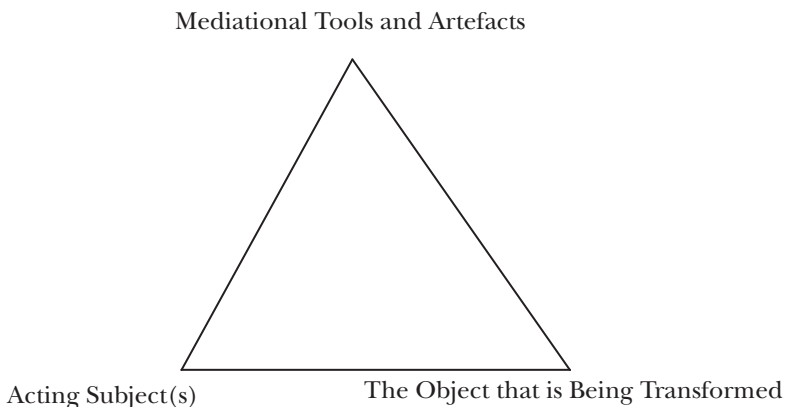
FIGURE A   A Basic Mediational Triangle

the object can be joint action then arguably a wider range of concepts or other resources are brought to bear on the problem space that is the object.

Relational agency is a capacity that is brought into play when the situation allows. It lies in the individual and in the affordances available for action. As a capacity it can be learnt and elicited in different situations. It is not embedded in existing relationships and carefully designed pedagogic zones of proximal development, but may emerge in both formal and informal settings and with people who are known and as yet unknown. It allows us to work with others in pursuit of ever expanding objects and to explore the possibilities that these new objects reveal. While it may be found in responsive forms of 'scaffolded' zones of proximal development, it may also be found in the open-ended learning zones characterised by Lave and Wenger's third category of zone of proximal development.

The importance of relationships for learning is not new to CHAT. It is evident, for example, in Wells' studies of dialogic enquiry (Wells, 1999) and Mercer's work on the importance of exploratory talk for the development of reasoning (Mercer, 2000). However, relational agency is not simply a matter of dialogic reasoning. There are a number of additional elements. I shall briefly outline some of them.

Mutual Responsibility

Hicks (2000), for example, has argued that moral projects are curiously absent from studies of social learning. For Hicks, in such projects the self is placed in relation to the intentions of others. She argues that a stronger emphasis on the recognition of the moral aspects of engaging with the sense-making and goals of others can enrich dialogic accounts of learning. Hicks' idea of self-in-relation resonates with Taylor's concern with the problem of the overweening selves that are produced by modernity and the need for a stronger connection of individual selves with the common good (Taylor, 1991) and with Shotter in his call for a relational ethics (Shotter, 1993).

Earlier Taylor had described agency as a capacity to identify the goals at which one is directing one's action and to evaluate whether one had been successful (Taylor, 1977). This view of agency as a capacity to interpret and act has driven my own work on individual agency and identity over the years. However, like Taylor, I have become concerned about an emphasis on individual action at the expense of responsibility to and for other others and see a shift to the relational as an important move in the development of meshes of mutual responsibility.

While ethical issues are not often highlighted in CHAT, work on the ethics of care (Noddings, 1984) has found its way into CHAT analyses of support for learners. Drawing on Noddings' work, Goldstein (1999) wove an inter-relational strand into her analyses of the zone of proximal development, which was a 'scaffolding' version if we are to apply the Lave and Wenger categorisations. Goldstein emphasised what she described as teachers' 'engrossment' in and

'receptivity' to the standpoints of learners so that both teachers and learners could struggle to make sense.

In the pedagogic settings described by Goldstein we can see that that a recognition of the relational aspects of teaching positions teachers alongside learners as acting subjects (Figure A) while they work on classroom tasks as objects or problem spaces. It therefore helps us to regard teachers as resources who are drawn upon by learners as they interpret and respond to tasks and who mediate the curriculum for learners.

Object-Oriented Activity

While Vygotsky emphasised how material and conceptual tools mediate culture and allow the incorporation of culture into individual minds, Leont'ev's work shifted attention to the object and its cultural construction (Leont'ev, 1978).

> The main thing which distinguishes one activity from an another, however, is the difference in their objects. It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it its determined direction. According to the terminology I have proposed, the object of an activity is its true motive. (p. 62)

One example of object motive that Leont'ev used was that of traders in gem stones who work with gem stones very differently from, for example, how geologists do. Each group would see different meanings held in the stones and the social practices of the activity system would differ accordingly. The idea of object motive importantly recognises that our actions are elicited by our interpretations of the object and by the ways of engaging with the object that are possible in different sets of socially and historically situated practices.

Stetsenko's recent work on Leont'ev's notion of object motive (Stetsenko, 2005) draws out features of object-oriented action which are relevant to my present argument. Firstly she notes the dialectic that exists between object and subject. As we work on an object the object itself works back on us and impacts on our subjectivity and how we in turn approach the object. In this transactional relationship between subject and object, by transforming the object through, for example, contesting its meaning and understanding it better, we also transform ourselves. The transformations of subjectivity and object are, of course, located within cultural systems which co-evolve along with the transformations that occur in the transactional relationship between subject and object.

For Stetsenko, the focus on the transaction between subject and object presents an opportunity to bring human subjectivity into activity theory, indeed a human subjectivity which "is laden with practical relevance and agency" (p. 83). This is a welcome development as elsewhere I have observed that the individual appears almost by default as a slippage in the system in the systemic analyses of activity theory (Edwards & Mackenzie, in press). Her argument is also relevant to discussions of the importance of relational agency.

For example, joint action by two teachers on a problem in classroom organisation involves bringing to bear two subjectivities and sets of conceptual tools on the problem and thereby expands interpretations of the problem. When the expanded object works back on the subjectivities of the teachers, these subjectivities are likely to be enriched by the interpretations of the other. This may be a tortuous argument and unnecessarily theoretical when we can also talk more simply about teachers and problems of classroom organisation. However, these frameworks have wide relevance and a way of talking about them which is not located in specific situations is necessary.

The Wider Relevance of Relational Agency

2005 is 'The Year of Relationships' for the British Psychological Society, signalling that psychology is at last beginning to recognise some of the methodological challenges posed by the fluidity and flux that characterises late modernity. Goodwin (2005), echoing years of research on social capital (Field, 2002), explains in *The Psychologist* why he studies relationships "Everywhere, however, we found that close relationships acted as important 'social glue', helping people deal with the uncertainties of their changing world…" (p. 615).

The mobile and dislocated communities of late capitalism create paradoxical tensions for those who inhabit them. Individual lives are interconnected as never before (Friedland & Boden, 1994) and boundaries are increasingly difficult to maintain, yet at the same time the ethics of modernity demand individual and personal responsibility. Arguably strong forms of agency are required to help people find moments of stability as they move in and out of different settings without the protection of what Sennett (1999) describes as "institutional shelters".

In our current work with professionals who are collaborating to prevent the social exclusion of children we are seeing the beginnings of a move away from the institutional shelter of taken-for-granted expertise embedded in historical practices. The reform of children's services and new relationships between schools and their communities in England through extended schools have meant that individual children's trajectories of inclusion have become objects of activity for more than one practitioner at a time. With the result that when a teacher works responsively with a social worker or a community nurse to support a vulnerable child she may have to abandon the institutionalised goals and values of the school which employs her. That kind of responsive work calls for strong forms of professional agency, but perhaps without the protection of the home institution (Edwards, 2004).

In brief, I am suggesting that

- strong forms of agency are necessary for professional practice in complex settings and can be learnt;
- such agency needs to be evident outside the institutional shelters of established systems;

- individual agency can strengthened through a capacity for joint action;
- CHAT analyses can explain the importance of relational agency.

Using the Concept of Relational Agency in Research

My work has all been based in UK, though I have tested the ideas during visits to research groups in Australia and in Scandinavia. Nonetheless, this line of work has emerged from weaknesses in social practices within what are essentially Northern European settings.

Reforms in schools, teacher education and other welfare professions in England over the last two decades of the last century focused on highlighting the performance and accountability of individual professionals who are located within carefully calibrated systems of accountability within their employing organisations. These systems strengthened boundaries between professional groups and limited professional decision-making to a matter of following procedures. As a result, the exercise of professional expertise has been constrained.

The implications of these reforms are particularly marked when one looks at inter-professional collaboration. A major contradiction emerging in our work on the development of inter-professional practice is strong vertical accountability within systems, at a time when horizontal connections between different professionals is needed to give responsive support to children who are at risk of social exclusion.

In this part of the paper I shall draw lightly on my own research on teacher education to identify what is lost when relational agency is not recognised as important. I shall then briefly look at it in use in social inclusion project for adults. Finally, I will discuss its potential in our current work on inter-professional collaboration. In each of these examples I will also pay attention to the immediate social practices of the settings and the wider societal conditions that shape them.

Relational Agency in Teacher Education?

Over the last two decades of the last century a major programme of educational reform occurred in England. It involved the implementation of a tightly controlled national curriculum, national tests for pupils, school league tables and rigorous school inspections which focused on compliance to the reforms. Teacher education was also reformed and increased emphasis was placed on curriculum delivery and the individual performance of teachers against specified observable standards. For the last ten years of that period I undertook a programme of research on teacher education which focused on how student teachers learnt to teach while they were placed in elementary school classrooms in schools on teaching practice. Much was being made of the importance of school-based training, indeed some argued that it was a form of apprenticeship, which should replace the time that student teachers spent in

University.

There were some striking messages from that research programme.

- Student teachers very rarely interacted with other teachers while they were in classrooms learning to teach.
- Their work was guided by lesson plans, often supplied by the class teacher.
- Feedback focused on their delivery of the lesson and the pace at which children moved through the curriculum.
- Adherence to the lesson plans meant that student teachers became increasingly less responsive to children over the year of their training.

At the same time in the elementary schools where this work was being carried out, teachers were developing new forms of specialist expertise. Each school had a specialist in children with special educational needs and individual teachers were given responsibility for managing the schools' science, literacy and maths curricula. It was expected that schools would operate as systems of distributed expertise, where non-specialist teachers could look for advice from their more expert colleagues in specific areas.

Yet the students we tracked were becoming polished performers in the art of curriculum delivery, unable to admit to any difficulty rarely looked for help from other teachers and avoiding any situation which took them away from their prepared plan. They were not expanding the objects that they encountered in their teaching. They turned away from anything that happened in their classrooms that they had not predicted in their plans. It was too risky for them to deviate from their planned actions.

They developed expertise in lesson planning, because they could work on the planned curriculum as an object with the teachers or other students. But once in classrooms they were on their own and their teaching was limited to delivery and pace. We argued that this severely limited the development of their professional identities as responsive teachers who were able to exercise pedagogic expertise.

Just one example. In one study (Edwards & Protheroe, 2003, 2004), we asked twenty four student teachers to talk us through examples of where they felt they has helped children to learn in each of the forty seven the lessons we had just experienced with them. Most of the responses focused on how well they had presented the curriculum. The following response from a student who had been working with six year olds exemplifies the tyranny of the plan and how it could get in the way of being responsive.

> Daniel asked me for a word. It was a k and he couldn't find it in his word book. So I showed him there is j and k on the same page. But it wasn't planned.

Here a student teacher is apologising for deviating from a lesson plan to tell a six year old child how to find a letter in his vocabulary book. This focus on planned performance and lack of responsiveness resonated into children's relationships with each other: only one of the twenty four student teachers mentioned helping children support each other as learners (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004).

The position of the school-based teachers who had given up their classrooms to the student teachers was also striking. They were frustrated by being kept away from their pupils with only the plan to guide the student teacher (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004). As a result, the student teachers were not benefiting from the insights and professional wisdom of these expert practitioners in the act of teaching. They were not experiencing an apprenticeship because they were not working alongside more expert practitioners. Importantly the complexities of the professional problems that emerge unplanned in dynamic classrooms were not being revealed to them in joint work on pedagogic objects. Therefore they were not learning how to respond to increasingly complex readings of classroom situations. It was during the analyses which revealed the limitations of current forms of teacher education in England and the under-use of the expertise of the classroom teachers that idea of relational agency in professional practice began to develop.

Relational Agency and Social Inclusion

The next study was located in a drop-in centre which was used mainly by women who lived in an inner city housing estate and who were at risk of social exclusion through economic and educational disadvantage. For historical reasons the centre was not located in systems of hierarchy and accountability. It had operated on the estate for over twenty years and strong relationships of trust had been established with the community. It was in stark contrast with the conditions of accountability that operated in schools and initial teacher education in the previous studies. Here two centre workers describe their approach.

> …it's the same for every individual. If you've got a friend who doesn't judge you and you know is supportive, then it can make a big difference.

> I think that purpose is having somewhere to go that is open, you can go in at any level really. Go in for a cup of coffee. Go in for advice. You don't need a reason to step over the door, you know to use the professionals here …you might be seeing your friend, seeing what is going on for the kids….

Workers helped users to sort out their electricity bills, to deal with problems they were having with children or violent partners. That is, they worked fluidly across professional boundaries and jointly with users on the problem spaces they presented. Stability and fluidity marked the social practices of the centre and were evident in the way that the users of the centre talked about it.

> All the staff are very friendly and helpful. It is a nice place to go if you need support and advice.

> There is a lot of support. I get a lot of support because I give a lot of support.

> When you see someone there who is depressed, you think to yourself, well I was lower than that and I've come to this (better) stage now…you have to approach them first, because they won't approach you…you know that because you have been there.

We have written about this project to describe how the resilience of the users was built in interactions with all the centre workers (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005). Importantly, that resilience did not lead to dependency, but to a growing independence and a capacity to give support to others. The relational agency between workers and between workers and users that we observed there helped users of the centre to become more expert at drawing on the resources that were available to them within existing systems. For example they became able to pay their electricity bills in installments, over came mental health problems and learnt to talk with confidence to their children's teachers.

In the final set of studies we see relational agency brought into play as practitioners learn to work together in new forms of collaborative practice.

Relational Agency and Multi-professional Practice

I am currently working on two studies which are located within a new reform agenda in England which aims at preventing the social inclusion of children and young people by building protective factors around them (Dartington Social Research Unit, 2004; Edwards et al., 2006).

We know what these protective factors are and we know what is needed to build them (Jack & Jordan, 1999; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). They include relationships with responsive adults and improved educational attainment. There are considerable implications for the professions who work with children. Here I shall simply focus on inter-professional collaboration.

In both projects we have conceptualised children's development as trajectories. The reform agenda aims at disrupting trajectories of exclusion and redirecting them towards inclusion. Evidence of inclusion is the child's use of the resources that society makes available to them, which would include school attendance. Responsive professional practice on those trajectories involves working children's strengths and needs, knowing what you as a teacher can do and also what you can't do and knowing where to go for help from other practitioners.

Elsewhere I have described this capacity as "knowing how to know who" (Edwards & Wiseman, 2005). Knowing how to know who is at the core of inter-

professional working. As one practitioner put it

> It is only a matter of adjusting what you do to other people's strengths and needs.

She is describing a capacity to align one's professional practice with those of others when working on the problem space which is the child's trajectory. That trajectory is a mobile, changing object, it races ahead of practitioners opening up new possibilities and demands on practitioners. In both studies we are seeing professional learning, as a developing capacity to recognise and call upon the resources available to support the trajectories of young people as they move towards social inclusion.

Practitioners who, like the student teachers we observed, have developed their expertise in the following of procedures have weak forms of professional agency when working with unpredictable objects of practice particularly, but not only, when the work outside their institutional shelters. Part of the way forward is for shelters such as schools to rethink professional development so that there is some focus on building strong forms of agency in professional decision-making while working on unpredictable objects. This argument returns us to relational agency, both in professional training and in professional practice.

Implications of Relational Agency for Professional Learning and Action

Most work on professional learning focuses on forms of apprenticeship or induction into the meanings that are valued within the practice. One attraction of the community of practice metaphor has been the extent to which it captures historically valued patterns of participation and the knowledge embedded in them. However, it does not deal with developing new practices to work on changing objects.

In describing relational agency as joint action on an object of activity I hope I have given enough emphasis to the following features.

- The possibility of contesting interpretations of the object, while working within sets of professional values
- The mobility, or changing nature, of the object
- The fluidity of relationships: collaborations may be with different people and relationships may shift within the action
- The location of joint action within systems that are able to deal with expanding understandings of the object
- That expanding objects occur within co-evolving systems

I also recognise that by focusing mainly on relationships between practitioners in this paper I am underplaying relationships between practitioners and clients which can also involve relational agency (see e.g. the idea of co-configu-

ration discussed in Victor and Boynton, 1998). I am also not attending to the extent to which material artefacts are loaded with the intelligence of others and can assist performance (Clark, 1997; Knorr-Cetina, 1998). Both of these elements add weight to the argument that professional training should involve attention to accessing resources available to practitioners when working on problems in practice and that agency should be brought back into accounts of practice to explain engagement with these resources.

The five features of relational agency that I have just listed call for an enhanced version of professionalism to be developed in organisations which focus on transforming the objects of institutional practices. That is, an agentic version of professionalism to be found in organisations which allow practitioners to bring to bear their own professional values and knowledge on the changes they deal with as an alternative to rigid compliance.

Professional learning is therefore not simply a matter of induction, though induction into values and key skills is important. Professional learning needs to include a capacity for interpreting and approaching problems, for contesting interpretations, for reading the environment, for drawing on the resources there, for being a resource for others, for focusing on the core objects of the professions whether it is children's learning or social inclusion.

Relational agency can serve different purposes at different points in professional learning. In initial training it can be weighted towards a sharing of existing expertise in the interpretations of problem spaces and supported pathways of participation in response to them. There a capacity to work with others and to negotiate meanings should be seen as valuable and not evidence of weakness. Relational agency in initial training can, I suggest, help enhance professional agency and reduce current emphases on learning to comply.

Our current work on multi-professional working offers one example of post-qualification professional learning within new settings. The children's trajectories of inclusion is a very specific example of a new and mobile object to be worked on, which calls for a fluid and responsive professional practice in which the expertise of different professionals are woven together. As I argued earlier, knowing how to know who is an important part of professional knowledge for this kind of work.

Though specific, the issues tackled in multi-professional work are not unique. They simply exemplify the paradox of personal responsibility within sets of practices which remove practitioners from the protection of their professional shelters. Earlier I argued that they called for a strong version of professional agency which is sustained by joint work. The alternative is compliance which would reduce responsiveness to the evolving objects of professional activity.

The Implications of Relational Agency for CHAT

CHAT has not dealt easily with the idea of the active agent. Writing from the

sociocultural-social practice end of the field, Dreier comments that "The concrete location of individual subjects in social practice remains strangely implicit or ambiguous" (Dreier, 1999, p. 6). While within Engeström's systems version of activity theory the subject emerges almost by default when there is enough slippage in the system to allow it (Edwards & Mackenzie, in press).

However there are signs that there is a return to a focus on externalisation alongside internalisation and a concern with how individuals act on and shape their worlds as well as being shaped by it. A recent special issue of *Mind, Culture and Activity* (Kapetelinen & Miettinen, 2005) on object related activity, which re-examined object motive and its relationship with the social and with individual subjectivities, is just one witness to that shift.

What is clear is that we still know too little about the micro level negotiations that form the evolving shape of the collective, mobilise and move knowledge within activity systems and sustain the affective aspects of object motive. Relational agency attempts to open up the nature of fluid object-oriented joint action within changing systems, and to begin to reveal how mediation can accompany externalisation through joint action in response to joint interpretations of the object. As Chaiklin (2001a) observes, CHAT is an immature field. Relational agency is merely offered as a conceptual tool that may help us to get to grips with one corner of it.

Notes

The ideas in this paper have also been developed in:

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