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Editorial: Dialogues and interaction as “the nursery for change”

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This Special Issue deals with specific qualitative intervention and research frameworks, all grounded in Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology and activity theories (Leontiev, 1978; Vygotsky 1978). They are called “Developmental Methodologies”, as they share a critical focus on development in social and work practices. Research based on Developmental Methodologies may help both academic theory and social practice be more critical (and self-critical) and help them transform one another into reflected processes of development. These methodological frameworks share some specific features: (a) they build on mediation by signs and tools, (b) they aim to analyze and transform social practices, (c) they connect practitioners in the collective analysis and transformation of these social practices, (d) the research designs created are dialogical frameworks, based on a complex blend of collected data on everyday work activity and dialogues triggered by these data, (e) in these dialogical frameworks, analyzing everyday work activity is not a goal per se, but a way in which to trigger transformation, as experience is mediated and transformed into an object of inquiry, and (f) the researchers, besides supporting the interpretations of the practitioners, also try to support the development of these interpretations, thus leading to change and learning.

One of these frameworks is the Finnish Developmental Work Research (DWR, Engeström 1987), with its Change Lab methodology (Virkkunen & Newnham 2013) and associated Change Workshops (Seppänen & Koli 2010). The latter is an adaptation of the Change Lab methodology: it has shorter research times and focuses more on work-related well-being. Other interesting and important developmental frameworks are the French Activity Clinic approach, with its Cross Self-Confrontation (Clot, 1999, 2008, 2009) or Instructions to the Double (Oddone et al., 1981; Clot, 1999, 2001) methodologies, and the American 5th Dimension (Cole & Engeström 2007) methodology. In the last ten years, a scientific dialogue regarding these frameworks has developed at international conferences (see for example ISCAR 2008, 2011; Sannino, 2011) . This Special Issue aims to deepen this

interdisciplinary, collective inquiry as to what happens, and how it happens, in developmental interventions, using the frameworks presented in this Issue. In particular, the Special Issue reports on the analyses of the dialogues and interactions observed within these developmental frameworks and research designs.

Our focus here is on understanding the socio-cognitive processes in developmental interventions and methodologies. In these, change and knowledge production are anchored in a dialogical stance, as defined for example by Wegerif, (2007), Fernyhough, (1996) or Markova (2000, 2004) as multiple perspectives held together in tension. The conceptual and practical transformations useful for collective action, as well as the resulting scientific knowledge, are produced by provoking, contrasting, echoing, and deepening multiple views on the same objects of the activity. The different steps of the methodologies are realized through dialogues and interactions in which the researchers and the practitioners make use of interactional resources in creative ways. Therefore, by locally analyzing these dialogues and interactions we may obtain a better understanding of the larger mechanisms at play. This gives us access to both the “discourses in place” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), which realize the continuation and transformation of social practices, and to their recontextualization in the dialogical frameworks. Dialogue is filled with tension and surprise, leading to unpredictable outcomes. Understanding what happens, and how, is not only scientifically stimulating, but also a critical lesson for improving our intervention tactics and tools, and interfering with the dynamics of social change. Dialogue and interaction can therefore be described, in a double sense, as “the nursery for change” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p.38).

The papers gathered in this Special Issue offer ways of analyzing dialogues and interactions in these developmental frameworks, which vary in terms of the goals and methods of the analyses and the framework under study.

The first paper by Heli Heikkilä and Laura Seppänen, grounded in DWR, presents the method of Developmental Dialogue, which was recently applied to support the well-being of practitioners undergoing transformations in rail traffic control activity in Southern Finland. A systematic analysis of some sequences of intervention within the Developmental Dialogue framework highlights traces of different types of transformative agency, and relates the occurrences of these types to the use of some theory-driven tools or discussion topics used by the researcher. Analysis of dialogues offers directions for further improvement of the intervention methodology.

The second paper by Riikka Ruotsala analyses data from meetings and workshops during a formative intervention (Change Workshop) in a manufacturing company. Collaboration types, and a typology of “discursive turning points”, are used to study the development of the interaction modes between participants during the creation of a shared tool. The analysis sketches the interplay between the concepts built by the subjects, the objects of the discourse, and the interaction scripts, in order to better understand and support the future development of cross-functional collaboration.

The third paper by Katia Kostulski and Laure Kloetzer, anchored in the Activity Clinic perspective, investigates the relations between the form and the psychological function of the dialogues in Cross Self-Confrontation. The sequence analyzed is extracted from an intervention conducted among Roman Catholic Priests on preaching in homily. Controversy is seen as a means of developing dialogical thinking, based on the interplay of four levels of dialogue, from external to internal dialogue. The paper demonstrates,

both theoretically and empirically, how the interfunctionality of levels of dialogue may serve developmental processes.

The fourth paper by Livia Scheller, also issued from an Activity Clinic perspective, discusses an intervention conducted in the administrative and technical service of a trade union using the methodology of Instructions to the Double. The role of the affects and their transformation in the dialogical framework are demonstrated on the basis of commented sequences of instructions. The links between the development of the affects and the transformation of conflicts in the work situation are then further discussed. The paper provides an overview of the principles of the Activity Clinic approach and the methodology of Instructions to the Double.

The fifth paper by Honorine Nocon and Ellen H. Robinson tracks the development of teachers' appropriation of key concepts in a training program as part of their learning. This evaluation is performed through a detailed analysis of textual data produced in the course of the program, in particular, in teacher manifestos. The authors therefore provide a method of analysis of textually-mediated social worlds, which may help us further understand and evaluate different developmental frameworks based on activity theories and Vygotskian perspectives.

The last paper by Ritva Engeström expands the scope to the epistemological level, by discussing how the modes of meaning construction investigated in DWR question the traditional modes of scientific knowledge construction. The author states that the main value of DWR lies in its interest for “parallel conceptualization and constructive facilitation of social transformations”. In DWR, things are examined “in their reflexive context of being inside and outside at the same time”. Marková's concepts of objectifying and anchoring are examined as ways in which to conceptualize this double process.

Altogether, these contributions show an interesting variety of developmental frameworks that have evolved historically in different ways and are applied in different cultural contexts, still sharing similar theoretical roots. Academic investigations of developmental interventions and methodologies can advance theories, as shown in this Special Issue by Katia Kostulski & Laure Kloetzer or Ritva Engeström, contribute to improving methods of intervention for development and learning as in most of the papers in this Special Issue, or be used for developmental evaluation as illustrated by Honorine Nocon and Ellen Robinson. These papers also raise interesting questions for further examination, at the methodological and theoretical levels, for example: What is the impact of the mediations we offer on the development of the activity? Specifically, what is the role of the researchers in these collaborative methodologies? How do our developmental methodologies impact our models of language and activity (and conversely)? What is the role of dialogue in the development of thought? How can institutions support the collective change process? What are the relationships between individual and collective agency, and between collective agency and institutional transformation? We hope you enjoy reading these papers, as a backdoor into “applied dialogism” and the nursery for change.

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