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Junghwan Kim

*Pennsylvania State University*

Intak Kwon

*Chonbuk National University*

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# **Basis of Learning in Urban Communities: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and the Limits of Contemporary Adult Learning Theories**

Junghwan Kim & Fred M. Schied,  
Pennsylvania State University

Intak Kwon  
Chonbuk National University

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to examine CHAT as an alternative approach to understanding learning in urban communities as a means to overcome the challenges of existing adult learning theories. The authors argue that CHAT provides a comprehensive theoretical view to understand learning in urban communities driven from activities within socio-cultural contexts.

## **Problem and Purpose Statement**

Understanding learning within communities is both complex and has a great deal of meaning for adult education. Jarvis (2007) points out that learning in diverse communities is important as an alternative form of education in a lifelong learning society beyond that of formal educational settings. Many scholars have argued that a central activity of these groups is to engage the community by incorporating learning activities into daily lives and that learning is an essential adult education endeavor (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Bickford & Wright, 2006; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Sawchuk, 2003).

In particular, urban communities reflect societal problems around the issues of diversity and race, ethnic group, and segregation (Martin, 2004). Moreover communities not only provide socioeconomic benefits through creating social capital among adults (Balatti & Falk, 2002) but also encourage the voluntary participation of adults. Adult learning- including formal, informal, and non-formal- plays an important role in deepened and expanded adult learning with a focus on reflection as well as community development (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). Hence, understanding learning/ education in communities is an important area for investigation because it goes beyond just researching formal adult community education (Bickford & Wright, 2006; Johnson, 2000).

Learning in urban communities cannot be described as internal processing exclusively because learning occurs through socio-cultural contexts, including learners' backgrounds as well as any external contexts in which they are surrounded (Daniels, 2004; Engestöm, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Marsick & Wakins, 2001). Learning in urban communities occurs in diverse and dynamic interactions among ethnic groups, residents, and community-based organizations. Learning from this perspective is understood as not simple/ one-dimensional, cognitive phenomenon of individual or something in a formal setting but rather complicated/ multi-dimensional phenomenon based on various socio-cultural contexts in everyday life (Illeris, 2004; Sawchuk, 2003). However, most adult learning theories have proven

to be inadequate to meet the challenges of understanding learning in urban communities (see Engestrom, 1987 and Sawchuk, 2003 for discussions on the inadequacy of adult learning theories).

Although many adult learning notions and theories emphasize the importance of social context to overcome the dualism between individual (subject) and society (object or environment), they primarily assume that it is necessary to understand them separately. Moreover, these theories still only focus on individuals' characteristics, cognitive change or development and formalized education or formal learning (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Sawchuk, 2003). Furthermore, even if some theories emphasize informal attribute, organizational level, and situatedness of learning beyond the agent perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Marsick & Wakins, 1990, 2001; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Yorks & Marsick, 2000), not only are they limited in explaining the diversity and dynamics of adult learning, but they also do not explain the process of cultural mediation between the individual and society (Engestöm, 1987, 2001; Engestöm & Miettinen, 1999; Sawchuk, 2003; Youn & Baptiste, 2007).

In this regard, through comparing existing adult learning theories, this paper aims to examine the possibility of CHAT as an alternative approach to understanding learning in urban communities as a means to overcome the challenges of existing adult learning theories.

### **Challenges of Adult Learning Theories**

The most important challenges to the notions of andragogy and self-directed learning are that, they are not considered organizational and social interventions to adult learning, and they excessively emphasize individual characteristics of adult learning (Grace, 1996; Merriam, et al., 2007).

Although the transformation learning theories of Mezirow and the “pedagogy of the oppressed” theory of Freire consider social interactions and situational context important to adult learning and try to expand the range of transformation to the group or organizational level (e.g., action learning) (Yorks & Marsick, 2000), they fundamentally emphasize not only the internal process of the individual, especially cognitive change/ development but also focus on systemized or well-bounded settings (Baumgartner, 2001; Freire, 1970; Merriam, et al., 2007; Mezirow, 1994, 2000; Newman, 2010)

The notion of experiential learning as conceived by Dewey (1938) is a theoretical effort to overcome individual and society dualism as well as the concentration of individual characteristics and cognitive dimension on adult learning. Although Dewey emphasizes the integration of the individual with society, his concept of experiential learning actually highlights the separation of the subject from object since he does not suggest what connects the individual and society (Fenwick, 2000; Park & Schied, 2007). Besides, many experiential learning theories do not sufficiently explain how negative learning or contradictions among subjects by experience occurs (Engestöm & Miettinen, 1999; Fenwick, 2000; Merriam, et al., 2007).

Recently, other efforts (e.g., informal learning, organizational learning, and situated learning) have been developed to overcome problems such as excessive focus on formal learning, the dualism between individual and society, and an almost exclusive emphasis on individual learning. Although the concept of informal learning provides a useful theoretical foundation, it does not sufficiently consider a variety of social relations, power relations and mediating instruments (Marsick & Wakins, 2001). Meanwhile, despite the expansion of learning

level from the individual to the organization, organizational learning or learning organization theories still consider individual learning only exists for supporting better organizational systems and the diversity of learning is restricted in a systemized setting (Kim, Joo, & Schied, 2010). Moreover, many models of organizational learning have an assumption that “the assignment for knowledge creation is unproblematically given from above” (Engeström, 2001, p. 151). Finally, although the situated learning theory of Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasizes the situatedness of learning when considering group interactions or collaborations based on socio-cultural practices and artifacts, they do not capture the diverse types or dimensions of learning by suggesting well-bounded communities of practice to become collaborative subjects of learning (Engeström, 2001; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

These partial or bounded understandings of existing adult learning theories prevent a comprehensive understanding of daily learning in urban communities that have diverse and dynamics characteristics.

### CHAT as an Alternative View in Understanding Learning in Urban Communities

#### *Theoretical Development of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory*

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) was initiated from the cultural-historical school of Russian psychologists L. S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leont'ev, and A. R. Luria in the 1920's and 1930's (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). CHAT is a theoretical framework that developed from three generations of activity theory.

The first generation was initiated by Vygotsky. Along with his colleagues Luria and Leont'ev, he developed the idea of ‘mediation’ as a cultural tool for human actions in order to explain that the individual could not exist without society and vice versa (see Figure 1). In other words, a human (S) never reacts directly to the environment (R), but instead the individual (subject) and the objects of environment (object) are indirectly connected by the cultural mediating artifacts: tools and signs (X). Through evolving this idea, he overcame the dichotomy between individual and societal structures and thus, in great detail he could suggest the idea that an object lies in equal position to a subject (Engeström, 1987, 2001).

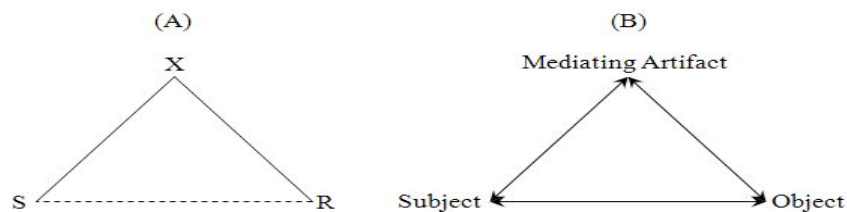


Figure 1. (A) Vygotsky's Model of Mediated Action and (B) Its Common Reformulation (Engeström, 2001, p. 134)

However, first generation CHAT had a limitation in that it focused the unit of analysis on the individual. To overcome this limitation, a second generation iteration of CHAT was developed by Leont'ev. In this generation, the activity is defined as “a form of doing directed to an object” (Kuutti, 1996, p. 27) and “the minimal meaningful context for understanding individual actions” (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 10). The object of activity is defined as the motive of an activity (Leont'ev, 1978). The object is based on

objectified needs and becomes a true motive when objectified needs based on actions by conscious goals meets with an object (Foot, 2001, 2002). Specifically, a motive is an object that meets a certain need of the subject and a drive to perform an activity by motivating subject (Foot, 2002; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Leont'ev, 1978). Thus the object or motive is “the most important attribute differentiating one activity from another” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 61). Object in this sense “...has a dual status; it is both a projection of the human mind onto the objective world and a projection of the world onto the mind” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 137).

Leont'ev explicated the concept of activity by explaining the role of mediating cultural instruments within the social dimensions of practice. In other words, he argued that the relationship between the environment and an individual is mediated by cultural means: tools and signs related to the social dimensions and relations of practice (Leont'ev, 1978). Originally, the concept of mediation by humans and social relations was not included in the triangular model of the first generation until Leont'ev included the concept of division of labor as a basic historical process at the root of mental functions. Furthermore, Leont'ev suggested the concepts of two other components; rules and community (Engeström, 1987; Leont'ev, 1978). These works of Leont'ev are considered to be the second generation of the activity model. However, he did not graphically depict his concept as a triangular model, the activity system of the next generation.

The third generation of activity theory is primarily based on the work of Yrjö Engeström. This generation includes efforts to systemically arrange the seven components of an activity: subject, object, mediating artifacts (instruments), rules, community, division of labor, and outcome (see Figure 2). Engeström based the activity system on Leont'ev's concepts, but described collective rather than individual activities (Engeström, 1987).

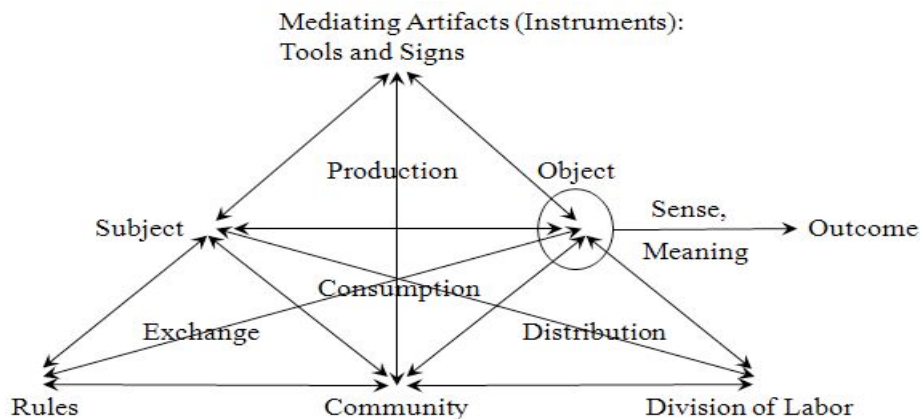


Figure 2. The Structure of a Human Activity System (Engeström, 1987, Chapter 2; Engeström, 2001, p. 135)

At the top sub-triangle, ‘*Subject*’ indicates an individual or group who engaged in an activity. ‘*Object*’ plays a role in distinguishing an activity from other activities because it guides and leads the activity. It may be a material entity or a non-material purpose. ‘*Mediating Artifacts (Instruments)*’ are cultural tools and signs. They include both abstract and physical artifacts such as ideologies, habitus, language, maps, and all

sorts of conventional signs, symbols, computers, and works of art and so on. At the bottom line, ‘Rule’ includes formal/ informal conventions and norms which “afford and constrain the goings on within a functional activity system” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 222-224). ‘Community’ means a group of people who collaborate over time in sharing the same object of an activity. It is not communities of interests but rather communities of practice that share repertoires, undertake joint enterprises, and facilitate mutual engagement. ‘Division of Labor’ refers to horizontal and vertical social strata that indicate the different assignment, role, status, power, or responsibility among various actors. The rule, community, and division of labor represent one side of socio-cultural contexts with mediating artifacts (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, et al., 2002).

In this generation, the basic model has evolved to include, at a minimum, two interacting activity systems (Figure 3). The figure shows that the contradiction occurs between the objects of activity systems (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). According to Engeström (1987), the contradictions can occur within and between the components in an activity system (an activity), and among activity systems (activities) in the network of activity systems (Engeström, 2001). The contradiction is considered as “sources of change and development”. They “are not the same as problems or conflicts” but “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). Negotiating or resolving contradictions leads to the transformation, advancement, and development of an activity system and the network of activity systems.

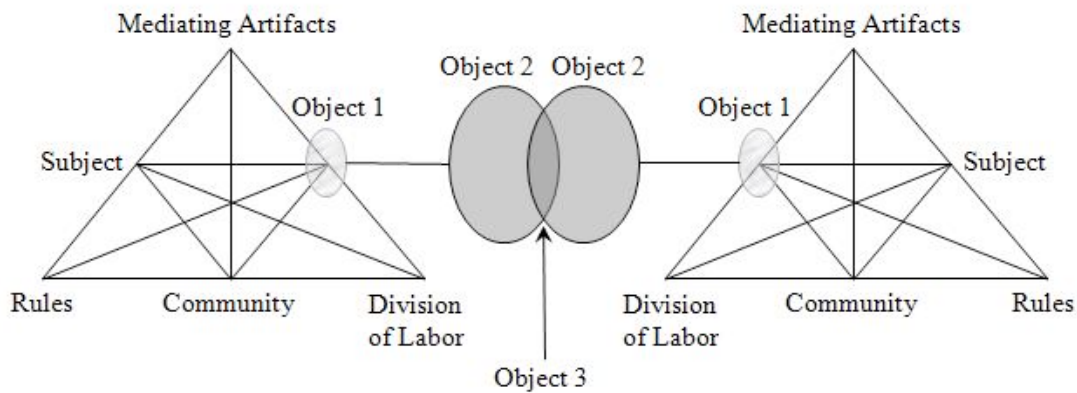


Figure 3. Two Interacting Activity Systems as Minimal Model for the Third Generation of Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

CHAT provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing both the manifest and latent processes among activities. The structure provided by the triangular diagrams and the associated diagrams detailing multiple ones provided the opportunity to reveal hidden relations and to understand contradictions within an activity as well as among activities (Engeström, 2001; Sawchuk, 2006). In particular, the concept of contradiction allows us to reveal challenges among stakeholders in urban communities who contribute to adult learning.

### *CHAT Perspectives on Learning*

CHAT overcomes many challenges associated with existing adult learning theories such as the dualism between individual and society, emphasis on individuals' characteristics, cognitive change or development and formalized education or formal learning, and simple explanation/ only positive description of adult learning (Engeström, 2001; Sawchuk, 2003).

Learning in CHAT is driven by cultural-historical human activity (Vygotsky, 1980; Leont'ev, 1978; Engeström, 1987). This means that learning occurs through dynamic and continuous interactions among individual, societal, and cultural mediations within socio-cultural contexts (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). This approach denies that learning can be understood by examining cognitive change, development, or characteristics of individuals. Instead, learning can only be understood by investigating the relationship between subject and object through interactional mediations. Hence learning is understood to be a social, rather than just a psychological and individual process (Engeström, 2001; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Sawchuk, 2003).

Learning from this perspective is seen not as a simple one-dimensional, cognitive phenomenon but rather as a complicated multi-dimensional phenomenon based on various socio-cultural contexts in everyday life. Learning in CHAT as a *possible* outcome of activity includes both individual and organizational learning (Engeström, 1987, 2001). Thus CHAT enables one to see the comprehensive dimension of learning in informal settings or daily life. Moreover, CHAT allows us to investigate the dynamics and diversity of adult learning within urban communities by considering socio-cultural contexts, including internal/ external ideologies and power relations, surrounding activity systems.

In this respect, the flexible and diverse attributes of CHAT provide a useful and powerful theoretical framework to examine learning in urban communities in everyday lives without regard to situation (Engeström, 2001; Sawchuk, 2006). These attributes emancipate researchers from having to rely on bounded, systemized, stable, and formalized settings in order to understand adults' learning. Moreover, the concept of contradiction overcomes an assumption that learning always occurs in a positive way, a faulty assumption made by many educational researchers (Engeström, 1987, 2001). Finally, CHAT provides a comprehensive and exhaustive framework for analyzing both the manifest and latent processes among activities.

### **Implications and Contributions**

Although CHAT is not a perfect theory to explain adult learning, it is clear that CHAT leads to a change in the adult learning perspective from that of a psychological orientation to a broader and alternative socio-cultural view. CHAT provides a valuable theoretical framework to overcome some basic problems of current adult learning theories such as the subject and object dualism, the privileging of characteristics and cognitive dimension of individual, and the focus on formalized settings. Therefore, CHAT as a theoretical framework provides a useful insight that thoroughly understands learning in urban communities within diverse and complicated socio-cultural contexts.

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