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“Creating What I Think I Should Be Doing”: Contradictions and Learning of College Job Changers

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Abstract: This study describes workplace learning after job changes. A cultural-historical activity framework identified contradictions: balancing conflicting expectations; managing ill-defined roles; encountering bureaucratic constraints; and mitigating gaps in institutional vision.

Keywords: workplace learning, college staff (non-faculty), cultural-historical activity theory

Colleges and universities are, by definition, designed to promote student learning. For those who wish to build and sustain a career in higher education, responding to shifts in institutional priorities and being willing to change jobs within the institution is a necessity. In addition, college and university staff are often managing their own learning projects, particularly following a change in job title or description. Empirically, job satisfaction for non-faculty staff has been found to be stressful (Winefield, Boyd, Sawbel, & Pignata, 2008), with job satisfaction dependent on perceptions of leadership (Webb, 2009) and work life (Rosser, 2004).

This qualitative study explored the experiences of nine non-faculty staff personnel at a small college who had recently experienced a “significant” job change (as defined by the participant). Each participant had recently taken a promotion, been reassigned due to a reorganization, or pursued a new assignment for personal and career development. In the initial thematic analysis (Olson, 2015), participants identified the challenges of understanding the job, defining what it meant to be “competent” in that role, and learning how to manage the new responsibilities while also effectively serving students.

This roundtable focuses on secondary data analysis using a cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) framework (Engeström, 1999, 2001) and outlines how non-faculty staff at a small college described their own workplace learning experiences in and after the job change. To focus on the activity of learning a new job within a particular division, this analysis uses data from six participants in the study who all worked in a recently restructured and reorganized division of the college. A CHAT analysis highlights the impact of cultural norms/mediators, formal and informal rules, division of labor, and contradictions within the personal, communal, and organizational contexts of job change and is generally represented as seen in Figure 1.

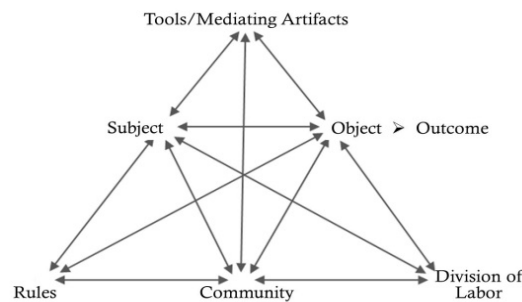


Figure 1. Components of an Activity System (Engeström, 2001)

From the data, “job changer” was identified as the subject, with “competence in the new job” identified as the object. Mediating artifacts and tools included such things as habitus (within

the work environment), formal training, self-directed learning, and networking. Rules were described as internal and external constraints, including constraints and policies related to technology. The division of labor (how the tasks fit together) required managing meetings and responsibilities, setting agendas, shifting responsibilities, working with and for students, and in some cases actually *creating* a new role. The elements of community (how the people work together) included navigating corporate culture, relying on relationships, and learning to lead.

Foot (2001) described contradictions within an activity system as the starting points for the development of the activity (and, by extension, movement toward the object). Within this analysis, participants described several contradictions. The first, *balancing conflicting expectations and goals*, encompassed issues such as new academic advisors walking the line between meeting student expectations while also preserving academic rigor and meeting retention goals. In the second, *being responsible for multiple, ill-defined roles*, participants outlined overlapping expectations of their former roles and the new roles; many of these participants were moving into jobs that had not previously existed in the institution. The third contradiction, *managing bureaucratic and technological constraints*, suggests that participants often found that creating a workaround (for systemic or systems-related roadblocks) required a significant amount of energy; while it created an opportunity for learning and development, it also slowed their progress toward the object of the activity system—competence with the new job. The fourth was identified as *mitigating discrepancies in 'sense of urgency' and vision across the institution*; participants—especially those moving into leadership—described instances where doing the new job required learning to energize unmotivated and de-motivated co-workers.

This activity, as identified by CHAT, shows how college staff can experience workplace learning by negotiating the contradictions. Participants demonstrated some awareness that these contradictions were places of learning. In fact, one participant attributed some of her effectiveness in the new role to her incompetence and incomplete knowledge: “I’m asking questions that may not have been thought of before, or looking at things in ways that may not be looked at because everyone’s been doing it forever. Or saying things in a way that might be easier to understand.” Ultimately, the analysis explores the nature of workplace learning in institutions of higher learning as unstructured, informal, and at times inefficient processes.

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