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Letting Jesus Reveal Himself: The Use of CHAT Methodology in the Christian Learning Environment

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Abstract

Viewing Jesus as the master teacher, this chapter investigates the pedagogies used by Him in teaching individual New Testament characters. The article aimed to focus on the interactions Jesus had with two of these characters and analysed them in light of each's specific culture and history. This method of analysis, which is known as cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), is unpacked not only as a means of understanding the mode of Jesus' ministry, but as a research methodology and a teaching method designed to meet the needs of students in the Christian classroom.

Introduction

Who better to show teachers how to reveal Jesus in the learning environment than Jesus himself? The classic story in John 4 of the woman at the well and the story of the expert in Jewish law found in Luke 10 are examples of how Jesus revealed himself in those 'on the spot' environments. These examples have become models for all teachers in terms of how to reveal Christ.

This chapter seeks to investigate the pedagogical methods that were used by Jesus and how they align with cultural historical activity

theory (CHAT). It is posited that not only can CHAT be utilised to analyse Jesus' methods as the master teacher, but that the theory can be used as a research methodology in itself. With this, teachers can investigate which pedagogies enable their learning environment to reveal Jesus.

What is cultural historical activity theory?

CHAT is a theoretical framework that acknowledges the strong connection between what people think and what people do, or between their mind and their activity (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström & Gallagher, 2009). When considering this relationship, Vygotsky's work shows that the impact of an individual's cultural experience and their history in a social psychology sense influences their 'consciousness' and thereby affects their actions (Vygotsky, 1978).

Michael Cole subsequently gave the acronym CHAT to the development of Vygotsky's work in the 1990s (Cole, 1996). Here, he asked the question, 'Why do psychologists find it so difficult to keep culture in mind?' (Cole, 1996, p. 1). The answer to his own question is that traditional or experimental psychology is scientific in nature (Schonbein, 1997). Its methods are standardised and fall in line with the general rules of human behaviour, failing to take into account the context of the person involved, which includes their culture and history. It was at this point that CHAT originated, forming a second stream of psychological thought that 'is concerned with unique actions understood in their particular contexts, an approach which seems fundamentally at odds with general psychology's quest for context-free universal mental processes' (Schonbein, 1997, p. 1). In the words of Cole (1996), 'psychological processes do not stand apart from activity but, rather, are constituted by the activity of which they are a part' (p. 22).

In structural terms, Cultural Historical Activity Theory as a methodology has several main elements. The main unit for evaluation is known as the 'activity system'. This involves 'networks of sociocultural elements, with complex mediation structures that shape the collective actions of individuals who are motivated to achieve a goal' (Trust, 2017, p. 99).

CHAT is based on Vygotsky's (1978) idea that many actions performed by humans have a goal or object in mind in view of working towards a preconceived outcome. In education, an object is more likely to be called an 'objective', or a projected learning outcome. In this sense, the objective emanates from the activity system (Nardi, 1976). Here, the object or *objective*s are considered to be the background or the reason why people act in different ways and demonstrate different actions (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

Another term used in this theory is the term 'subject'. The subject within an activity system is the person or people who are or who become engaged in the system. According to Roth and Lee (2007), subjects go about the task of pursuing the objective, and as they do so, who they are and what they learn is shaped and changed as a result of their interaction within the activity system.

Meanwhile, 'tools' represent the mechanisms through which the subjects in the activity system move from the objective to the outcome. According to Kozulin (1998), these tools can be psychological or physical, while Trust (2017) offers the following:

> Tools are deeply embedded within the elements of the activity system. When the subject selects a tool, to use the tool defines the way the subject carries out an action. The subject often shapes and enhances the tool to make it more effective and useful, which then changes the way the subject completes a task. (p. 100).

The term 'community' is also used in CHAT. Within a community, different people take on different tasks but there are always rules – be they written or tacit – as to how participants should carry out their roles within the community. As the outcome is worked towards, new knowledge and skills are gradually acquired.

How Jesus created an activity system in John 4?

Trust (2017) sets the agenda by stating that '[c]ultural historical activity theorists contend that people's goal-oriented actions are *mediated* by *tool*s and shaped by the sociocultural norms, rules, and divisions of labour within a community' (p. 98). Jesus was able to moderate the tools that He used according to each of these factors. The sociocultural norm of the era was that Jews and Samaritans did not communicate, while the rule was that men should not begin a

conversation with a woman. This was particularly true for a Jewish male seeking to engage a Samaritan female in a philosophical conversation. Meanwhile, the division of labour dictated that the woman should not have been at the well at this time of the day and that a man should not be asking her to draw water.

All of these limitations had developed as a result of historical and cultural contexts. The relationship between Jews and Samaritans had been a highly tenuous one over a long period of time. Much like how we have witnessed the hatred between Muslims and Serbs in Bosnia and between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the volatile combination of politics and religion played an important role in the rift between Jews and Samaritans. While both groups were from Jewish origins, they were divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. McCloskey (n.d.) reports that 1 Kings 16:24 relates how the northern king, Omri, built the city of Samaria that later fell to the Assyrians. Here, captives were taken, and the Jewish blood became somewhat 'watered-down' as the Samaritan people married into the Assyrian tribes. It is clear from reading 2 Kings 17 that both Israel and Samaria abandoned their loyalty to God and just as the Samaritans mingled and married with their Assyrian captors, the Israelites experienced a Babylonian captivity that would also have been accompanied by a compromising of their pure Jewish blood. When King Cyrus allowed the Israelite captives to return to their homeland, the Jews regarded the Samaritans as no longer part of Judaism and would not even allow them to help with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The result was that the Israelites and the Samaritans looked at each other with distrust, each believing that they were the chosen people.

This political and cultural divide festered and developed over a period of time. As pointed out by Schuer (1992), 'In spite of some nasty name-calling from both sides and some violent action on the part of the Hasmonean rulers' the 'responsible Jewish halakhic authorities continued to regard the Samaritans from certain points of view still as Jews till late into the second century A.D.' (pp. 32-33). Therefore, in Jesus' time, while the Jews had some disdain for the Samaritans, there was still a cultural connection between them, but one that had been sullied by history. This means that when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan and when He was dealing with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, He was dealing with history, culture and

politics simultaneously and incorporating them into his pedagogical techniques. With the Good Samaritan story, he employed a delicate teaching approach in relating a story to the Jewish lawyer to illustrate an important point while keeping the historical, cultural and political considerations in mind. Meanwhile, in the story of the woman at the well, Jesus maintained the same considerations, but enacted them in a one-to-one conversation with the Samaritan woman, who was quite familiar with her place in culture and history.

Putting the story of the woman at the well in the context of CHAT, Jesus created an activity system around the well, but had several categories of subjects who bore witness. The disciples were subjects intimately involved in the activity system, both there to serve Jesus and to be learners. While they did not witness the whole interaction of Jesus and the woman, they returned to the well in time to see how engaged Jesus was with her. In fact, the Samaritan woman was the main subject engaged in the activity system, having the objective within the activity system of drawing water for her home from the well before this objective was soon modified by her interactions with Jesus. She became intrigued by His manner of speaking and by what He was saying and found herself fully drawn into the whole scenario, or the activity system. What she learned was shaped and changed as a result of her interaction within that very activity system.

The tools that Jesus used as the other main subject in the activity system, were His many excellent pedagogical methods for keeping the woman engaged. Central to His teaching method were the reflective questions that aroused the woman's intrigue, but also led her to reflect on her own life. These reflective questions were shaped and framed around Jesus' understanding of the culture and history of the Samaritans, but also of the woman herself.

Jesus was able to transcend racial, gender, social and moral barriers to reach this woman. The teaching point for her was that Jesus had no regard for the historical, cultural and political reasons why he should not be interacting with her. He wanted her to discover for herself that He was the Messiah. This is the gospel – it is life changing and it is a gift and it is independent of the individual's history, lifestyle or ethnicity. This is what grace is.

Why is CHAT Particularly Appropriate for Christian Learning Environments?

How are religion and culture related? And, how are religion and history related? In fact, the ideas of culture, religion, history, and even anthropology, ethnography, and sociology are all interconnected (Beyers, 2017; Cohen et al., 2016). According to Beyers (2017), given that religion is a cultural tradition, it is not 'possible to separate religion and culture' (p. 1). Is it possible to be a Muslim, or a Jew, or even a Christian, without having people associate some form of culture with that religion? For certain, religion is, to some extent, a way of expressing one's culture. If religion is therefore one particular subset of culture, then 'religion becomes an anthropological and ethnographic exercise' (Beyers, 2017, p. 1).

When discussing the relationship between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, because religion and culture are so closely tied, it is vital to consider the connection between the religion of the Samaritans and that of Judaism. In fact, while the religions were closely tied by history, culture had dragged them far enough apart that real conflict existed between the two. According to Cohen, Wu and Miller (2016), 'while religions may universally help to address needs for order, security, belonging, and self-transcendence' they 'do these in sometimes similar and sometimes different ways' and 'sometimes in concert with the overall culture, and sometimes the effects are more distinguishable or even contradictory' (p. 49).

It is apparent that Jesus was skilfully dealing with the history and culture of the Samaritan woman in His conversation with her. He was understanding the history and anthropology of the Samaritan people while understanding the impact he would be making on His disciples who were steeped in their own Jewish culture and traditions. While dealing with this crossover of cultures, histories and religions, He was in the process of using what we would regard as advanced pedagogies to demonstrate what grace would have meant to both parties. As pointed out by Beyers (2017), while culture and religion can be seen to work in partnership, 'the opposite relation between culture and religion is also possible: religion in opposition to culture (religion as anti-culture)' where '[e]ven when religion is part of culture, it is possible to differentiate religion from a worldview governing a cultural community' (p. 2).

This explains the interactions of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. His words brought about some cognitive dissonance within her when He said that if she were to drink the water He provides, she would never be thirsty again. This created a state of inquiry in her mind.

Indeed, the idea of drinking once and not thirsting again conflicts with our 21st Century culture of survival that involves a series of actions we need to go through each day in order to live and to support our families. Where grace is concerned, however, we receive a gift we do not deserve – the gift of a life that is eternal. This is the cultural currency of heaven and if adopted, it becomes our history, our culture, and our narrative.

If teachers were to emulate the methods of Jesus in their particular learning environments, they would seek to understand the individual culture and history of each student and plan to use those cultures to explain the culture of heaven. They would use multiple pedagogies such as asking higher order questions that would encourage the students to think critically. They would also use analogies such as Jesus did with the water in order to help students overcome the human ethic of their cultural immersion, which holds that we must work for everything. They need to know at every possible juncture that God's grace is egalitarian and that in God's eyes, everybody is equally deserving.

In his thesis from Princeton Theological Seminary, Jacob Cherian (2007) sought to build on 'Paul's understanding of God's disruptive and subversive grace and a new ethical paradigm revealed in the Christ event' wherein 'Paul demands a distributive ethic that radically cuts across the dominant socioeconomic system of patronage and expects gracious equality within the commonwealth of grace' (p. 2)

'Disruptive' and 'subversive' are terms that can be used in connection with constructivist learning. Students' ideas are disrupted as they work towards constructing their model of the gospel story that subverts human culture and its theories of the survival of the hardest working or the worthiest. The Christian teacher will seek to help students identify God's grace as being egalitarian through the complete and finalised substitute in the form of Jesus, who made the ultimate sacrifice for *every* person on earth.

White (1947) expresses this very clearly in stating:

> Christ was treated as we deserve that we may be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. By His stripes we are healed. (p. 27)

How Jesus Created an Activity System in Luke 10.

Now that Jesus' consideration of culture and history has been analysed in terms of His interaction with the woman at the well, a brief examination of another one of Jesus' interactions will perhaps prove helpful.

Jesus engages the expert in the law (Luke 10) in similar fashion. Again, there is an interplay among culture, history and religion. When Jesus told the lawyer the parable of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer asked the unusual question, 'who is my neighbour?'. Here, he was clearly meaning to ask what were the physical traits of someone who is defined as 'my neighbour'. The answer Jesus gave could not have been the one he was expecting to hear. In fact, Jesus used this opportunity to illustrate that a genuine neighbour is more like someone who acts out of love rather than out of political or religious motives. According to Hertzberg (2002), the meaning of 'neighbour' here is more like that of a 'kinsman ', and in the story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan acts more like a kinsman than the injured person's own countrymen. This would have provoked that same intellectual confusion within the young lawyer as the Samaritan woman had experienced.

According to CHAT theory, here, Jesus is again creating an activity system where He himself is the subject of the scenario and he clearly has an objective in mind. This objective appears to be His desire for the young man to think more broadly about the definition of a neighbour and also to think more broadly about the application of the rules the lawyer currently views in a very legalistic manner. The tools that He is using are again questions, while His use of a story or analogy we generally call a parable also applies in this case.

The aspects of culture and history Jesus had to be aware of and had to carefully structure the activity system around in this case

were different to the gender and ethnicity issues of the Samaritan woman. In this case, Jesus needed to delve deeper into the personal history and occupation of the lawyer. When the man asked what he needed to do to be assured of eternal life, Jesus turned him back to the documentation. Being an expert in rabbinical law, the lawyer was easily able to answer Jesus and even quote him. He responded that an individual need to love God with all of their means, but to love their neighbour as much as they love themselves. Being a literary expert, he realised that being able to carry this out meant that he needed to know the correct interpretation of what a neighbour is. With Jesus' use of an analogy, He was able to harness the lawyer's intellectual and interpretative skills.

The cultural aspect of this relates to how, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, an expert in Jewish law would have called the priest or the Levite the neighbour of the victim. After listening to the story, however, this expert in law knew that the Samaritan better fitted the definition of a neighbour. Here, Jesus triggered a deep thought and inquiry that resulted in an intelligent man being internally conflicted, but ready to answer thoughtfully on something that ran contrary to the beliefs he started the conversation with.

Again, the theme relates to Jesus looking into an individual's personal culture and history to come up with ways to reach them with the overriding idea that what people are really seeking is freely available and that He is keen to have them accept it. In the words of Spurgeon (1877), '[l]et it never be forgotten that what the law demands of us the gospel really produces in us'. (p. 1))

Jesus was telling the lawyer to stop trying to earn eternal life by 'doing' and to accept what was being offered and that he would very soon realise who was his neighbour and how he should relate to them, because this counter-intuitive gospel would lead him to recognising the adjustments he needed to make in his life.

In What Ways can CHAT be Used to Research the Impact of Christian Learning Environments?

CHAT was pioneered by Engestrom late in the 20th century based on the theories of Vygotsky. Using any type of activity theory is an ethnographic procedure because it involves dealing with the

complexity of human interactions and relationships. In short, CHAT adds the cultural and historical components.

CHAT is an ideal framework for researching teachers, teaching and any school-related activities. By extension, it can be particularly useful for Christian school research because many Christian schools and Christian school systems are built on a rich history and have certainly been influenced by the culture within the specific denomination they are affiliated with. According to Engestrom (1999), 'human activity is endlessly multifaceted, mobile and rich in variations of content and form' and '[s]uch a multi-voiced theory should not regard internal contradictions and debates as signs of weakness, rather they are an essential feature of the theory' (p. 20).

A researcher should approach Christian education research with the expectation that it is a complex area due to the differing personalities, complicated histories, and inbuilt cultures. Such researchers may discover that their findings are not always popular with some subjects in the activity system. This makes it vital for the researcher to implement a framework for the research in view of recognising the complexity of the activity system, having well-publicised objectives in mind, and being aware of the community in which they are working. They need to be aware that the history and culture of the participants ('subjects' in CHAT) and that the mediating artefacts and tools all need to be interrogated when looking at the overall activity system.

The mediation part of the process emerges in a variety of ways, such as, for example, explicit mediation 'where a tool is purposely and obviously introduced in order to develop an activity' (Douglas, 2014, p. 35). This is clearly what Jesus was doing when He introduced a parable as a tool that was interfaced with history and culture in his dealings with the expert in Jewish law in Luke 10. It is also apparent that this is where He introduced the tool of using intellectually conflicting statements with the Samaritan woman in John 4. As Jesus headed towards His outcomes or objectives for these interactions, He tailored His tools to optimise the desired outcomes. In short, artefacts and tools mediate the interaction of individuals with their environment (Douglas, 2014; Vygotsky, 1986).

While Christians have, for years, studied the Gospels and recognised the brilliance of Jesus in the way He interacted with people, in this chapter, we have related the pedagogical methods of

Jesus to actual scientific concepts in a way that, according to Blunden (2010), 'is meaningful not only in the domain of psychology, but also in sciences such as sociology, political science, linguistics and so on' (p. 5). Blunden (2010) goes on to say that it is an initial tenet of CHAT that what a person is thinking and what is driving them to act or to say in a conversation can be located in any historical communications between people, and furthermore, that the manner in which the subjects in the activity originally interacted has a definite impact on the spirit or persona of the main players.

While Jesus can be said to have extraordinary insights over and above that of the ordinary individual, He was able to use these to look into the minds of the subjects he was dealing with, to weigh up their history and cultural heritage and to plan non-threatening encounters that would lead them towards His objective.

Conclusion

In the two examples of Jesus' interactions with people presented in this chapter, it can be seen how He used whatever environment that confronted him as a learning environment. Jesus revealed himself as He met and conversed with these two people, using three techniques in the process that fit the methodology of cultural historical activity theory. These three properties are reported by Nocon and Nilsson (2013). First, the learning environment is both informal and impromptu, and the subjects are mixed in gender and ability. Second, 'the learners are not defined by their failures' (Nocon & Nilsson, 2013, p. 229), and, thirdly, both local culture and traditional culture are included and accommodated for within the flexible pedagogical space.

Jesus made the learning environment in both of these stories informal, and despite the expectations of the culture and the era, He was happy to meet and engage a simple woman around a well or a learned legal expert while on the road. While He made sure that the Samaritan woman was aware that He knew the failures she had experienced in her personal life, He made her feel important enough to realise she deserved the living water as much as anyone else. He also knew that the expert in the law had failed in his understanding of who his neighbour really is, but Jesus carefully crafted a story that would help him understand. Finally, Jesus took local cultures and historical traditions into account and met these people where they

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