Developmental Work Research: a search for congruence

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the potential of Developmental Work Research (DWR) as a method of enhancing collaborative creativity or problem-solving within youth and community work teams. Underpinned by cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), DWR has frequently been used as a method of examining work practices, identifying change, and imagining new ways of working (expansive learning) within the health, education and social care-based professions.

DWR is characterised as intervention-based research where a collaborative examination of the contradictions and disturbances within a CHAT activity system leads to transformations in practice at both team and individual levels. Such contradictions and disturbances are deep-seated structural tensions, often maintained by the cultural historicity of the system, and which manifest as visible problems or conflicts. It is the solution-focused examination of these that is the main work of the DWR process, and which provides a workshop-based, interactive environment where participants can work together through a facilitated 'past, present and future' timeline which acknowledges their contextual cultural historical traditions.

The DWR method supported recent doctoral research where it was used to examine how youth workers have responded to technological changes within the last 40 years, the incorporation of new technologies into current practice, and what this might mean for future practice. This experience will be used to reflect on the use of DWR as a qualitative research method compatible with youth and community work ethics and values and congruent with the training and group work contexts with which youth and community workers are familiar.

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Developmental Work Research: A Search for Congruence

Introduction

Congruence is a core principle of person-centred theory, often defined as the ability to "walk the walk, as well as talk the talk", with Rogers defining it as 'a matching of experience, awareness and communication' (1961, p339). Within informal education contexts and youth and community (Y&C) work practice, congruence is an important factor in the forming of authentic relationships of trust with young people, and I therefore wanted to adopt a methodology that felt congruent with my practice and where I could use my skills as an informal educator. I didn't want to feel inhibited by strict methodology, rather I wanted the methodology to enhance and free-up my approach, and to create an environment that felt familiar, collaborative, and participative. Crotty states that as 'researchers, we have to devise for ourselves a research process that serves our purpose best, one that helps us more than any other to answer our research question' (1998, p216). This paper will therefore provide both an insight into, and a justification for my choices.

My understanding of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and the associated workshop method of Developmental Work Research (DWR) took a while to evolve, but the more I understood it, the more congruent the approach appeared to be: firstly, in relation to its philosophical connections to both Dewey and Vygotsky, and secondly, as an active, participatory method that acknowledges professional traditions and core values.

Methodology

For the past seven years, my doctoral studies have been looking at the role of digital tools, spaces and places as mediators of youth work practice, with Dewey's pragmatism (Hickman, 1990, Miettinen, 2006), Papert's social constructionism (in Ackerman, 2002) , and their relationship to cultural-historical activity theory, underpinning the philosophical and methodological approach to my research. These approaches support my belief in 'knowledge as something that is accessed and developed in joint work on a potentially shared object of activity' (Ellis, 2010, p97), and that can be determined by exploring the subject matter in a group of practitioners who have substantial experience of implementing, managing and training Y&C workers to use digital tools, spaces and

places in their work. This conforms with Lave and Wenger's notions of situated learning (1991), which talks of learning as a process of social participation (Smith, 1999, 2009). A pragmatist researcher is not bound by strict rules, theories or boundaries because as 'everything can be questioned, the quest for knowledge is a never-ending process of answering questions and opening new ones' (Talisse and Aikin, 2008, p30). In my aim of achieving a congruent approach, a group-based approach, facilitated by the structure of a Developmental Work Research workshop, matched the process of Y&C work.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

The concepts underpinning CHAT were originally proposed by Vygotsky in the 1920's/30's and are comparable to Dewey's views on experiential learning (Price et al., 2013). They both believed that development and learning in individuals cannot be separated from the wider cultural and social context (Miettinen, 2006), and that individuals use or are facilitated to use 'mediated acts' to change the environment and/or context in order to achieve outcomes (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). In common with youth and community work practice where practitioners use a variety of 'tools' to work with young people, e.g. critical dialogue, reflection and activity-based interventions, mediated learning plays a central role in the CHAT activity system which is used in pursuit of specific objectives or outcomes. Engestrom et al. (1999) suggest that CHAT offers an appropriate conceptual framework for the analysis of organisational or work practices because 'it is a deeply contextual and oriented to understanding historically specific local practices, their objects, mediating [tools] and social organisation.' (Engestrom et al., 1999, p378)

Figure 1 shows a CHAT activity system. An activity is made up of a *subject*, a mediating *tool*, and is aimed at achieving an *object* and *outcome,* the *subject* being the initiator of the activity. The *object* is "owned" by the *subject*, which can be predicted or spontaneous, giving the activity system motivation, direction and meaning (Cassens and Kofod-Petersen, 2006). The *rules* frame the activity and provide boundaries, representing the cultural norms of the activity system in the form of the "way we do things around here", as well as policies, legislation, professional standards and ethics, which might be explicit or implicit, written or unwritten. The *division of labour* reflects how tasks

are divided up, the "who does what" within the system. In Y&C work practice, the division of labour is often shared between practitioners and young people, unpredictability adding dynamic tension
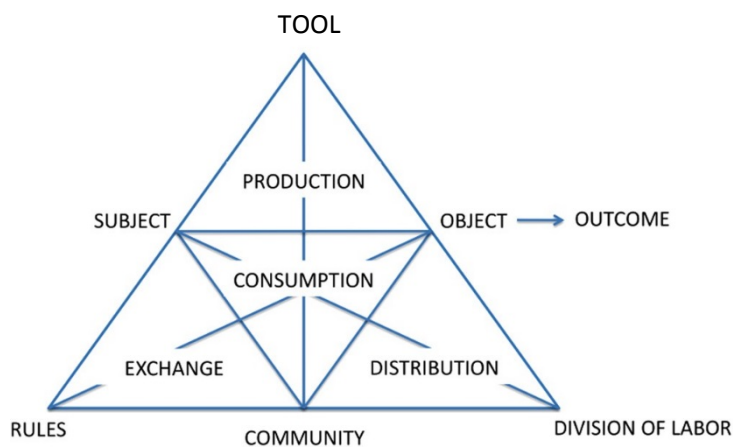
TOOL

PRODUCTION

SUBJECT   OBJECT ⟶ OUTCOME

CONSUMPTION

EXCHANGE   DISTRIBUTION

RULES   COMMUNITY   DIVISION OF LABOR

Figure 1: The Structure of an Activity System[1]

to the activity system overall.

An activity system mediated by the digital *tool* of Facebook is shown in Figure 2, and shows how the *subject* (school-based youth worker) achieves the *object* of keeping in touch with young people, enabling their participation, as well as promoting events, services and information, through Facebook (*tool*). Its usage is set in the context of policies and procedures (*rules*), the *community* shows who is involved and impacted by the activity system, and the *division of labour* indicates who does what.

CHAT 'grounds analysis in everyday life events, the ways people interact with each other using tools over time' (Russell, 2004, p224). In using CHAT to frame analysis, the focus is not just on the use of the mediating *tool,* but on how the *tool* is used to realise not only the *object* but also additional *outcomes*. When exploring scenarios where Y&C workers use digital tools, spaces and places in their

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[1] Engestrom, Y. (2015) *Learning by expanding : an activity-theoretical approach to developmental research,* New York, NY, Cambridge University Press.

work with young people, CHAT facilitates the exploration of a wide range of factors in the context of the core values, historicity and traditional practices of Y&C work, 'by identifying the ways people use [a digital tool], the needs it serves, and the history of its development.' (Nardi, 1996, p23).

Using Facebook with young people

Mediating tool:
Facebook

Subject:
School-based Youth Worker

Object:
Promotion of events, calendar, links to services or resources, Information- sharing, keeping in touch, participation

Rules:
Safeguarding
Youth Work Curriculum
Job description
Managerial direction

Community:
Youth workers
Young people
Line Manager
Youth Service
School
Local authority

Division of labour:
Youth worker monitors & supports young people.
Youth worker as initiator/catalyst.
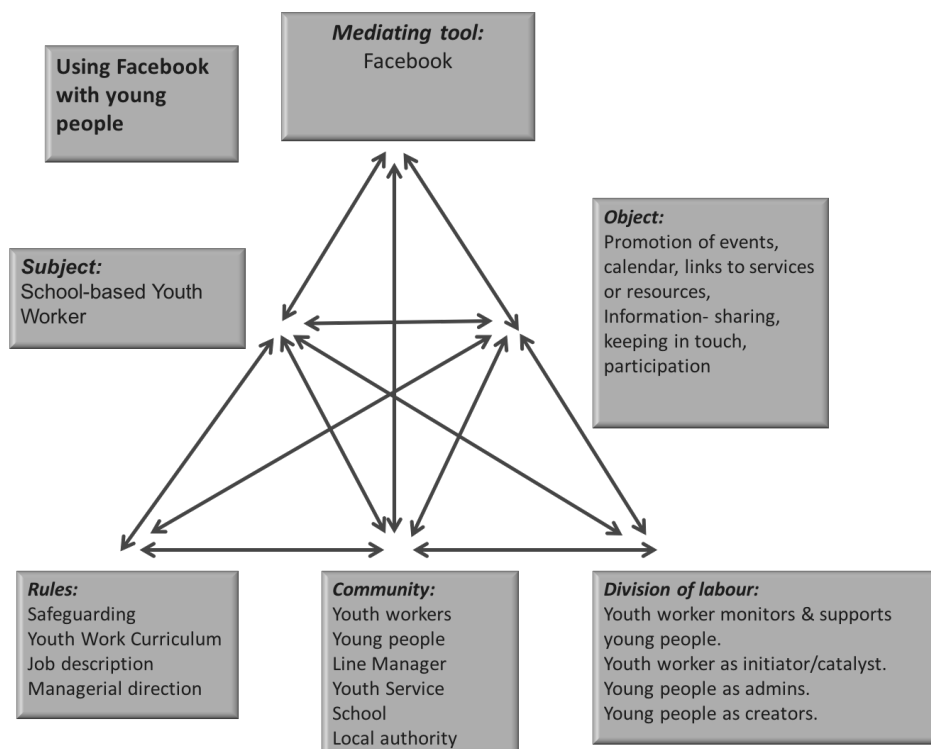Young people as admins.
Young people as creators.

Figure 2: Activity System using Facebook as the mediating tool

In a Y&C work activity system where using Facebook as a *tool* with the *object* of communicating with young people and enabling their participation, the motivation to achieve this *object* is driven by the *subject*, *rules* and c*ommunity.* Young people say they want to communicate in this way, and the *rules* (core values) dictate that young people are listened to. However, the *community* is not only made up of youth workers and young people: there is also the wider picture comprising the organisation, managers, and other stakeholders, including those responsible for making policy, as well as those who have the power to block or facilitate the professional use of Facebook. This can mean that the *object* can be influenced or impacted in a way that means that the *subject* may not always have much influence or control, and this is often where contradictions that impact on the successful achievement of the object may arise.

The study of such contradictions within activity systems are where '...a person or a group begins to radically question the sense and meaning of the context and to construct a wider alternative context…'**(Engestrom and Young, 2001, p138)** or where there is '…a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity' (Kuutti, 1996, p34). Contradictions should not be viewed as '…problems or conflicts, but deeply embedded structural tensions between elements of the system…' (Engestrom et al., 1999 :3) and it is a solution-focused examination of contradictions that is the main work of the Developmental Work Research process.

Developmental Work Research (DWR)

I used a DWR approach (also known as the Change Laboratory), because of its close association with CHAT, but also because a group-based process of critical dialogue and reflection enabled me to achieve the congruence with Y&C work practice that I was seeking. Group work is used as a key tool 'to support the development of a shared understandings and practices' (Davies and Cranston, 2008: p3) in Y&C work, and I believed that a group process would enable participants to explore each other's experiences and opinions in a way that a focus group or interviews would not.

DWR can be characterised as intervention-based research (Daniels, 2008), where interventions brought about as a result of the identification of contradictions and disturbances within activity systems lead to new or transformed ways of working to be identified (Engestrom et al., 1999). It provides a workshop-based approach where participants can discuss identified contradictions and explore possible solutions. The cultural historical element is explored through a structured exploration of past, present and future practice, the facilitator guiding the group to look to the past for parallel situations, in order to explore responses to the current or future situation.

The main aim of DWR is developmental change or learning in organisations or communities of practice, accelerated by the contradictions in practice being identified and challenged. In DWR, the examination of existing work activities starts with a presentation by the facilitator who identifies potential disturbances and contradictions, and this is known as the mirror approach (Kaptelinin et al., 2006). Engestrom states that when 'when practitioners face a mirror depicting their own

disturbances, they often experience them as personal failures or even crises. Powerful and unpredictable cognitive, emotional and social dissonances are triggered' (Engestrom, 1987, p16), and these reactions can lead to the identification of new ways of working. Contradictions are not always obvious and in the initial mapping of an activity system, a DWR participant might deliberately ignore tensions, may not be aware of them, or may not recognise them. It is thus important that the facilitator undertakes the first analysis of the participants' initial descriptions of the situation, and with the help of evidence such as video/audio materials, user feedback, anecdotes and statistics, they can support participants to acknowledge otherwise hidden tensions and contradictions.
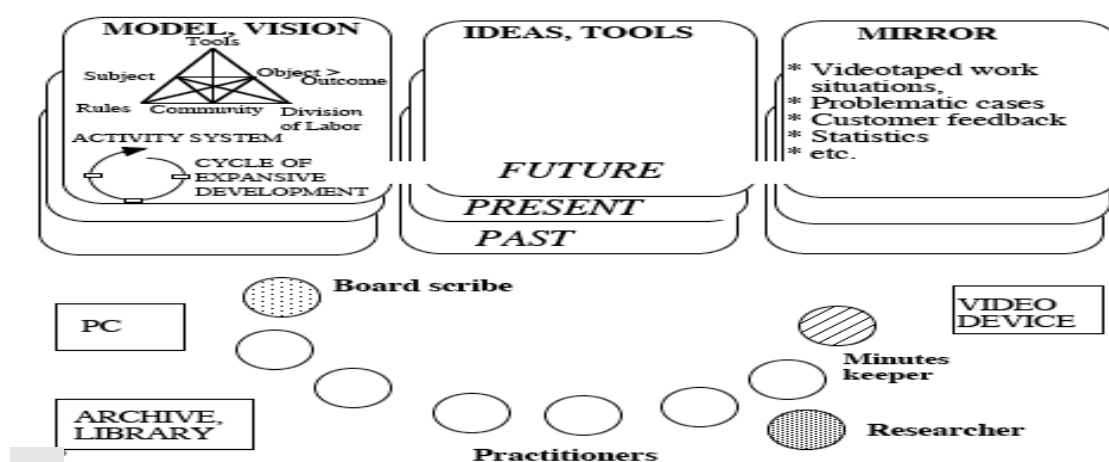

Figure 3: DWR workshop layout[2]

An example of a common contradiction identified from within my own research, is that of an organisation's social media policy prohibiting youth workers from using social media platforms in their work with young people, which then makes interventions designed to enhance young people's awareness of the safety issues connected to the use of social media, much more difficult or nearly impossible. The contradiction exists within the *rules* of the activity system, where the implementation of the social media policy both contradicts and impacts on safeguarding policy. This might result in Y&C workers trying to fulfil their safeguarding obligations towards young people

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[2] Engeström, Y., Virkkunen, J., Helle, M., Pihlaja, J., Poikela, R. (1996) The Change Laboratory as a tool for transforming work. *Lifelong Learning in Europe,* (1(2)), 10-17.

engaged in risky behaviours online, struggling to intervene effectively if they cannot use the social media platforms in question to engage young people experientially in discussions and activities relating to how they can keep themselves safe.

DWR when used as a research method requires that participants are purposively sampled and that the number involved is relatively small. This is both a strength and limitation of the process, and for my research project, participants were selected for their experience with digital technologies in Y&C work contexts, whether through being a practitioner, trainer or manager. Pre-DWR tasks fed into the process with participants creating their own activity system representations with guidance. The participants had common ground and familiarity with each other based on their understanding of Y&C work practice, despite their experience and career history being very different. These elements informed the evidence-gathering for the mirror approach which included resources such as National Occupational Standards, practice statements from national agencies, reports, related research, young people's views and other statistical data.

By using such resources, the facilitator exposes incongruities or anomalies 'within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity' (Kuutti, 1996, p34), and challenges the group with them in order to provoke a response. For example, a contradiction exists where Y&C work projects are required to work within organisational policy (*rules*) that prevents them offering young people access to free Wi-Fi or access to devices to get online. Such organisational policy contradicts Y&C curriculum statements (*rules*) that might aim to develop life and social literacies (including digital literacies) as an educational outcome, or in combatting digital inequality for young people with no internet access at home (Melvin, 2012). This might represent a 'deeply embedded structural tension' (Engestrom et al., 1999 :3) in that Y&C workers in this situation might feel that they cannot support young people's holistic needs. A solution-focused examination of such contradictions is the main work of the DWR process, and in the case of the previous example, would aim to include policy makers, managers, youth workers and young people in the process so that joint solutions can be determined.

Contradictions can be seen in 4 different parts of the activity system:

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1. Within an element of the activity system e.g. curriculum statements (*rules*) about meeting the digital needs of young people and risk averse policy (*rules*) which prevents the use of digital technologies;

2. Between elements of an activity system e.g. funding enables the purchase of iPads (*tools)*, but lack of training and policy leads to inconsistent use (*community/division of labour*);

3. Between activity systems e.g. a youth and community work activity system aimed at communicating with young people through social media (*object*), and the wider organisation's activity system aimed at communicating to the public (*object*) through corporate social media tools (e.g. corporate Twitter and Facebook feeds).

4. Historical disturbances existing between what exists now and how it used to be, e.g. face-to-face youth work and digital youth work

The resolution of disturbances and contradictions can lead to 'expansive transformations' (Engestrom et al., 1999, p3), and by adopting the DWR process, I was seeking to identify expansive transformations that might apply to Y&C work using digital tools, spaces and places. Figure 3 shows how Engestrom's expansive learning cycle can be realised through a DWR process, and my
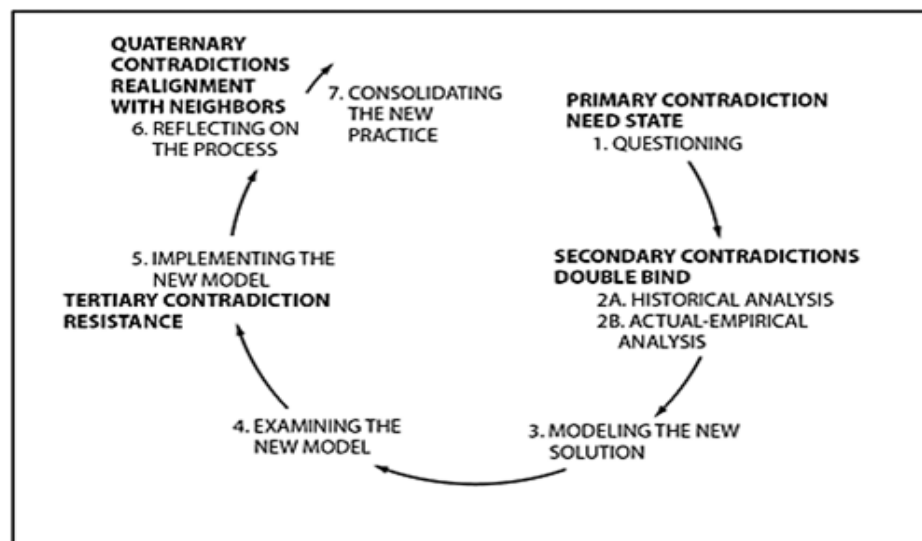

Figure 4: Expansive Learning Cycle[3]

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[3] Engestrom, Y. (1987, 1997) *Learning by expanding: an activity-theoretical approach to developmental research.,* Helsinki, Orienta-Konsultit.

own reflection and application of DWR throughout this research project can also be mapped against the cycle, since my initial pilot process enabled me to reflect, learn and apply adapted ways of working to ensure that the final DWR process was fit for purpose. It is here that the last measure of congruence can be found in the similarity between Engestrom's model and Kolb and Fry's experiential learning cycle (Kolb and Fry, 1975), and the relationship between reflection, experience and action on the basis that '…learning is best facilitated in an environment where there is dialectic tension and conflict between immediate, concrete experience and analytic detachment.' (Kolb, 1984, p1).

In Conclusion

In conclusion, Dewey states that 'it is that reconstruction or reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.' (Dewey, 1916, p59). In line with Y&C practice, a CHAT and DWR approach enables the cultural historical context to be respected and for experience to be valued, supporting an interactive and participative process which supports the reimaging of new or adapted ways of working.

As both DWR facilitator and researcher, I was concerned about influencing the group to progress in certain directions, either through my own contributions or through the mirror evidence. However, my instinct that DWR was a method congruent with both the experience and preferred ways of working of Y&C work practitioners was confirmed, as the group kept discussion and dialogue flowing with little input from myself. This left me to facilitate the "past, present, future" workshop structure, alongside the exposing of disturbances and contradictions.

As a Y&C worker, educator and researcher, the principles of developmental group work are fundamental to my practice, and the processes that frame the management of a DWR process align to Lewin's principles of group work where facilitators trained as change agents can facilitate discussion and transformation amongst group participants (Lewin, 1947), as well as to Button's concept of the group worker as a 'social architect' (in Robertson, 2009). As a tool for participatory research with young people, CHAT and DWR has the potential to provide an alternative to more

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traditional methods. Batsleer talks about how 'young people's involvement in research is not just about a series of techniques but inevitably requires young people's participation in ethical and political reasoning' (2010, p184), and DWR gives the opportunity for young people to work alongside Y&C workers, managers and policy makers and to experience these concepts on an equal basis. Through its very structure, DWR challenges the 'taken-for-granted power relationships and situated-ness of forms and relationships which may seem to have always been this way' (ibid, p188), meaning that the DWR method would support young people's position and perceptions in relation to how the activity system works, to be given as much value as those of the adult participants.

For Y&C practitioner-researchers examining issues related to mediated, situated and experiential learning, problem-solving, or factors impacting on the outcomes of Y&C practice, DWR as a method to challenge and stimulate discussion leading to change and transformations in practice, is one that many Y&C workers with experience of developmental group work would be able to facilitate. DWR techniques have the potential to 'make visible the agentic potential and critical role youth can have in the transformation of their own social futures ' (Gutiérrez et al., 2016, p275), making DWR a method congruent with research into Y&C work, as well with the participatory methods associated with the transformation of young people's lives through their contact with Y&C practitioners.

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