

**Activity Theory as a lens for considering culture: A descriptive  
case study of a multinational company developing and  
supporting training around the world**

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## **Abstract**

Activity Theory has often been used in the literature as a way to examine human activity, but the bulk of that work has been done in educational settings. Where it has been used in workplace environments, it has typically been used to enhance theoretical understandings of work and the humans who engage in work. It has not typically been used with an eye to advancing the business causes of the companies it has been used with. In addition, it has not been used internationally with multi-national companies. This is a shame, for with its Elements of Activity and its idea of contradiction, Activity Theory does seem to hold much promise for being able to shed light on cultural issues encountered by companies operating across national boundaries.

This research presents a descriptive case study of a company using Activity Theory to shed light on the potential cultural conflicts the company faced as it designed and developed training interventions for use in its affiliates around the globe. The research focused on being practical—on creating tools the company could use, and on detailing the methodology sufficiently that other instructional designers could employ Activity Theory in a similar way in other situations which they felt were relevant.

Although Activity Theory was not completely internalized by the company, with the assistance of a facilitator coaching them in its use the company was able to use the theory to avoid cultural conflicts, enhance understandings about cultural conflicts which did occur, debrief cross-cultural training interventions, identify improvements for future training interventions, and publicly share internally held cultural knowledge and beliefs.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

A former professor of mine was fond of telling his students that, “Opposite things are simultaneously true.”<sup>1</sup> Not only was this a handy way for him to diffuse classroom tensions when exchanges between ideologically opposing individuals would begin to heat up, it was also a way to try and take the discussion to a different level, where the issue was less one of “who is right and who is wrong” to “what does it mean to live in a world where opposing forces are simultaneously at work”.

In our increasingly globalized world, one set of opposing forces that is becoming increasingly important is the “shrinking” of the world which brings different countries and cultures into ever closer contact, and the valuing of diversity which supports the pride and preservation of different cultures. And yet, it may be too simplistic to think of these as different, i.e. separate, opposing forces. We are all the same species, *homo sapiens sapiens*, the last of our genus. We have survived to this day by virtue of our immense capacity for adaptation; we inhabit more environments than any other large, multi-celled organism on our planet. But that trait of ours as a species also serves to divide us as peoples. In adapting to life in different places and different circumstances, we have created different cultures, different socially agreed upon norms of behavior. In survival terms, this is functional. When it comes to interacting with other human groups, it can be dysfunctional. But this is not two separate, opposing forces, it is two manifestations of an underlying phenomenon. It is the plus and the minus of our adaptive capacity as a species.

Many philosophers have of course noticed this phenomenon; in the west, Kant and especially Hegel did much to popularize the concept of what they called *dialectics*,

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<sup>1</sup> Harbans Bola, Indiana University Professor of Education

the force of change arising from the contradictions between opposing forces springing from a common cause. Similar ideas come from ancient China with the concept of the yin-yang. Marx and (mostly) Engels took Hegel's primarily metaphysical ideas regarding dialectics and grounded them thoroughly and completely in the physical world with their *dialectical materialism*. Or perhaps it would be better to say that Engels gave us dialectical materialism, and Marx gave it a bad name. Which was too bad, as there is much that a sense of where and how opposing forces spring from a certain unity can inform us in our daily lives. Finnish researcher Yrjö Engeström (1987), reaching back to Marx and Engels through Vygotsky, did much with his Activity Theory to try and make the idea of opposing forces a useful tool for analyzing human activity. With its strong dialectical underpinnings, its detailed analysis of the "elements of activity", and indeed by making human activity itself the unit of analysis, Activity Theory seems to hold much promise for businesses seeking to carve out a competitive advantage for themselves in an increasingly global world.

One purpose of this dissertation is to give Activity Theory a test. It is to see whether and to what extent Activity Theory can in fact serve as a useful tool for a large multi-national seeking to enhance its competitiveness worldwide. The dissertation will tell the story of how I worked with the Global Marketing and Sales Capability (GMSC) section of a Fortune 500 company based in the Midwest to use Activity Theory as a lens for considering culture when developing training modules and providing support for affiliate training managers around the world. The aim is to learn more about the theory—to see whether or not it works (i.e., provides useful insights or leads to the development of useful tools) in this particular setting. Further, if it doesn't work, I want to open for

scrutiny some of the reasons it didn't, and suggest alternatives or alterations for the theory itself.

A second purpose of this project is to develop for the company a set of tools that they can use when considering culture in designing and supporting training. This dissertation is not a historical or anthropological account of a found system; it's not merely a description of the company as it was when I came across it. We sought to introduce a new element (Activity Theory) to the company and achieve a goal (new tools for considering culture). I too was committed to that goal.

These two purposes, while not necessarily at odds, do sometimes point in different directions. For example, failure to achieve the second purpose—failure to develop useful tools—might actually prove more useful for achieving a rich understanding of the limits of Activity Theory, thus enhancing the first purpose. I will have more to say about the complex relationship between these two purposes later. For now I simply want my readers to be aware of them and the fact that I as an individual was committed to and hoping for a positive outcome for both purposes.

In form, this dissertation is at heart a descriptive case study. It lays out the approach the members of the team and I took as we sought to use Activity Theory to gain new insights into the cross-cultural work we were doing, and seeks to describe that approach in sufficient detail that others who might find themselves in similar situations would be able to use a similar approach. In addition to being a descriptive study, the dissertation also has elements of other methodological orientations: an exploratory case study, an instrumental case study, and elements of action research. The case is exploratory to the extent that Activity Theory has not previously been applied in

international settings with the aim of seeing whether or not the theory “works” in the sense mentioned in the previous paragraph. As such, the level of generalization this dissertation will ascribe to is to generalize to the theory (Yin, 2003). In other words, to see whether the empirical results of the case study support the theory. To the extent that I hope, in the future, to expand on what I learn here to other cases, the case is an instrumental one (Stake, 1995). I expect that I will be able to use the results here to inform work with similar companies in similar situations. Finally, to the extent that my primary research orientation was that of participant-observer, the case has many elements of action research, specifically the characteristics that in doing the research I aimed to improve the practice of the group I was working with and to involve those same individuals in creating new knowledge (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

The specific research question this study will address is:

- Is Activity Theory a useful tool for helping develop and customize training in an international setting?

In addition to this central research question, there are several other important questions which will frame the inquiry:

- Does culture matter in an international business context? If so, to what extent and how? If not, what *does* matter?
- How can a company come to understand and leverage cultural difference in a multinational environment?
- What tools and procedures are necessary to support a multi-cultural approach to training?

- What implications do the company's approach have for the field of ISD?

## **Background of the Problem**

### *The Company*

The wider issue of the problem of culture has been explored above, but the problem that this dissertation will address is more specific. That is the problem of how a large multinational can function well in a multinational environment. The company in question is a Fortune 500 company based in the Midwest. Due to understandings between the company and me, the company will not be specifically identified, nor will too much detail be given about the company's products or its market. What can be said is that the company manufactures its primary products itself and markets them in over 150 countries. (Manufacturing is done in roughly a dozen countries, with the bulk of their product being produced in the US.) While not the largest of the companies in its industry, it is in the top 10 among its American competitors. The company has a long history, going back well over 100 years. During most of that time, the company has had some sort of overseas presence, with its first overseas manufacturing plant opening in the UK in 1930. It employs over 40,000 people worldwide, with about half of that number being outside the US.

When the collaboration between the researcher and the company began, the patent protection for a particularly profitable product had just expired. The company of course knew that the expiration was coming, and had spent much time planning for what it called "Year X". Still, when Year X came, the drop in revenue from the loss of their key patent was much deeper and came much faster than they had expected. In their industry,

products go off patent all the time. However, the drop shown by this particular product was the steepest in the history of the industry.<sup>2</sup> This led to the rather interesting situation of having a large multinational with billions of dollars in annual sales being financially pinched. Although there was near universal agreement among the individuals involved in this research project that the company's long-term prospects were good (a view echoed by industry analysts at large), the research took place in an environment that was typified by an organization in flux (Morgan, 1997). No one was complacent about the situation at the time; all knew that it was time to hunker down and work to pull the company through. Visions about where the company needed to go and how it needed to change to get there were part and parcel of the work being done. Although no one was worried about the company going under, there was some speculation that if the stock price dropped too low that they would be ripe for a takeover attempt. No one wanted that. Thus did the company's financial and market situation set much of the tone for the environment of the research. For the group specifically involved in this research, Global Marketing and Sales Capability, helping the company to manage its worldwide training well was not just a good idea, it was a way to help preserve the company's independence and put it back on the path to greater profitability.

The GMSC group itself was in some ways a reflection of the company's worldwide presence. Consisting mostly of Americans, the seven member team at the time this research began included one Japanese individual from the Japan affiliate, one naturalized American who was an ex-citizen of the UK born in (what was then) Rhodesia, and a US born individual of Arab descent. Four of the team members (including the

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<sup>2</sup> Personal conversation with one of the company's employees.

manager) were women. So while the group was clearly grounded in the US, it did have an international flavor.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps reflecting the flux that the organization was going through (or perhaps not, as frequent personnel changes seem to be part of the company's standard operating procedure), the composition of the group changed measurably over the course of the research project. The Japanese individual went back to Japan, almost certainly for financial reasons (though in truth he was nearing the end of the time the company had planned to keep him in the US). The team member in charge of evaluations moved to the company's in-house university. A new individual joined the team; his role was to oversee some of the distance learning initiatives the group was trying. The individual who was the "Project Manager" (a person whose roll was to coordinate the physical flow of documents—either editing, making changes, or printing them out and making sure the right people had them) changed three times. And the manager of the section left for another company. By the time I presented my final results and recommendations to the company, there remained only one individual who was on the team when the project first began.

The work of the GMSC was, like the group, transitioning in focus. Historically, the group (or perhaps more accurately, its predecessor groups) was mostly responsible for developing training modules for implementation primarily in the overseas affiliates. They did develop for and work with the US affiliate, but in many ways the US affiliate was its own show. In addition, the group worked in a sort of consulting capacity with training managers in the affiliates, helping them to develop and implement the company's training modules.

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<sup>3</sup> A flavor to which I like to think that I—US born to a Japanese mother and American father—added.

At the time the bulk of this research was conducted, the GMSC group was shifting its focus from the development role to the consulting role. The idea was to build up and support as far as possible local expertise in training, especially as regards customization to local circumstances and maintaining alignment with corporate goals. The corporate goals and strategic vision of the company, it should be noted, remain the province of the headquarters in the US.

This is interesting, because it means that the group has to navigate a couple of different multinational orientations. Leininger (1997) identifies four approaches that multinational companies can take, he calls them *ethnocentric*, *polycentric*, *geocentric*, and *heterarchic*. An ethnocentric approach is one in which decisions are made at the center, and little to nothing is done to adapt the methods of doing things from the company's home country to its affiliates abroad. A polycentric approach, true to its name, is one in which there are many centers. Local headquarters have broad autonomy, and the company looks more like a confederacy than a close-knit unit. With a geocentric approach, the company looks for a middle ground between the ethnocentric and polycentric approaches. Materials may be developed in the home country, but they are developed as far as possible with the international market in mind. In the case of a US company, Americanisms would be avoided, and examples and anecdotes would be presented in a way that would be universally appealing. Leininger's final category, the heterarchic, is a special case of the geocentric approach where hierarchical structures are deliberately de-emphasized.

Essentially, then, the GMCS group works in an environment where it needs to balance the firm's ethnocentric approach to strategy with a geocentric approach to implementation. The need to get that balance right frames much of what the team does.

### *Activity Theory*

Activity Theory is closely associated with Finnish researcher Yrjö Engeström, who laid out the tenets of the theory in great detail in his 1987 book *Learning by Expanding* (1987). As mentioned previously in this chapter, it seems a good candidate for navigating many of the cultural issues that a large multinational faces. Somewhat surprisingly, it hasn't often been used in that capacity. While researchers who cite Engeström have worked in international settings, I find no examples in the literature of a full Activity Analysis done with a multinational company struggling with international issues. Subsequently, part of the background in which this research takes place is one in which the central tenets of the conceptual framework remain largely theoretical. The question of the practicality of Activity Theory remains largely unexplored.

And therein lies the rationale for this dissertation. In Activity Theory we have what seems to be a potentially useful tool for helping companies navigate cultural issues, but we don't yet have a good sense of how practical it is. This dissertation will attempt to fill that gap.

### *The Problem as it relates to the field of IST*

The problem explored in this dissertation falls squarely within the Human Performance Technology (HPT) realm of IST. Although the department I worked with was responsible for sales and marketing training, they were not mere creators of traditional training (though they did that too). They took the wider view that they were

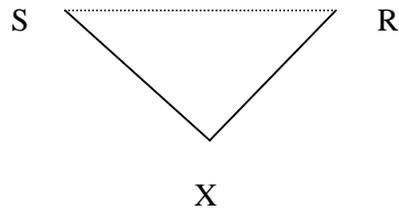
responsible for sales performance, and would happily look beyond training solutions in order to improve the performance of the sales force. By introducing Activity Theory as a tool for examining cultural variables, we hoped to enhance both training solutions (by making modules more appealing to trainees from different countries) and non-training solutions (by opening for scrutiny other possible barriers to performance).

## **Conceptual Framework**

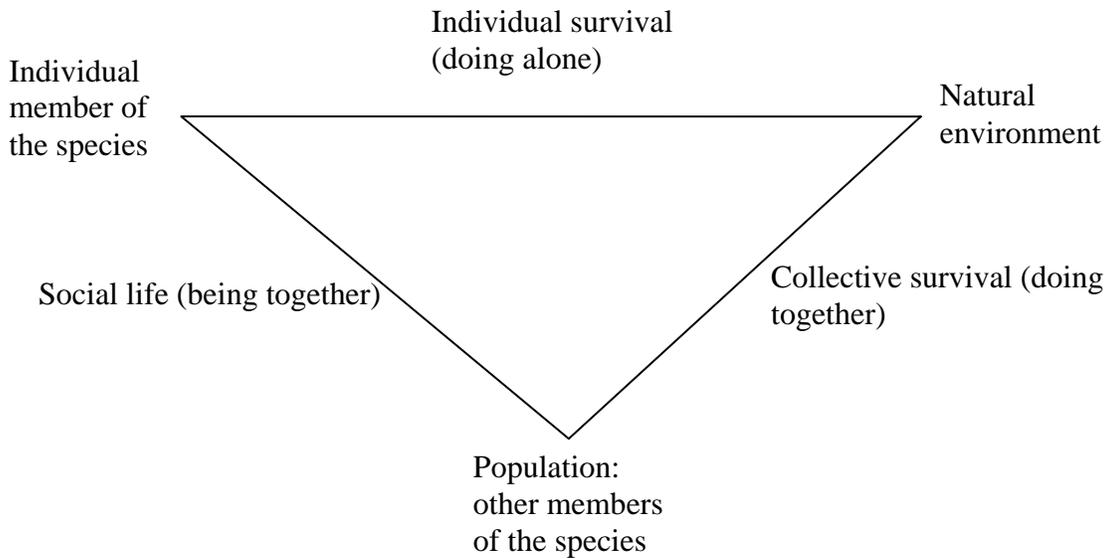
It is worth pausing now and laying out the tenets of Activity Theory in greater detail; this will also serve to set the conceptual framework for the dissertation. Activity Theory has two key aspects that were particularly important for this research: first, the Elements of Activity, and second, the idea of Contradiction, or Disruption. These will be explained in detail below, but I will begin setting the conceptual framework by exploring Activity Theory's physical framework. How would you know Activity Theory when you see it? What does Activity Theory look like? It looks like a bunch of triangles.

To understand why, we have to go back to Activity Theory's historical roots. In the 1930s, Soviet Educational Psychologist Lev Vygotsky sketched a diagram to illustrate his concept of mediation. Vygotsky's claim was that we don't act on things directly, instead our actions are mediated. He broke open the accepted direct link between stimulus (S) and response (R), adding an intermediate link which he labeled (X). "This intermediate link is a second order stimulus (sign) that is drawn into the operation where it fulfills a special function; it creates a new relationship between S and R." (Vygotsky, 1978, quoted in Engeström, p. 58).

The diagram he drew looked like this:

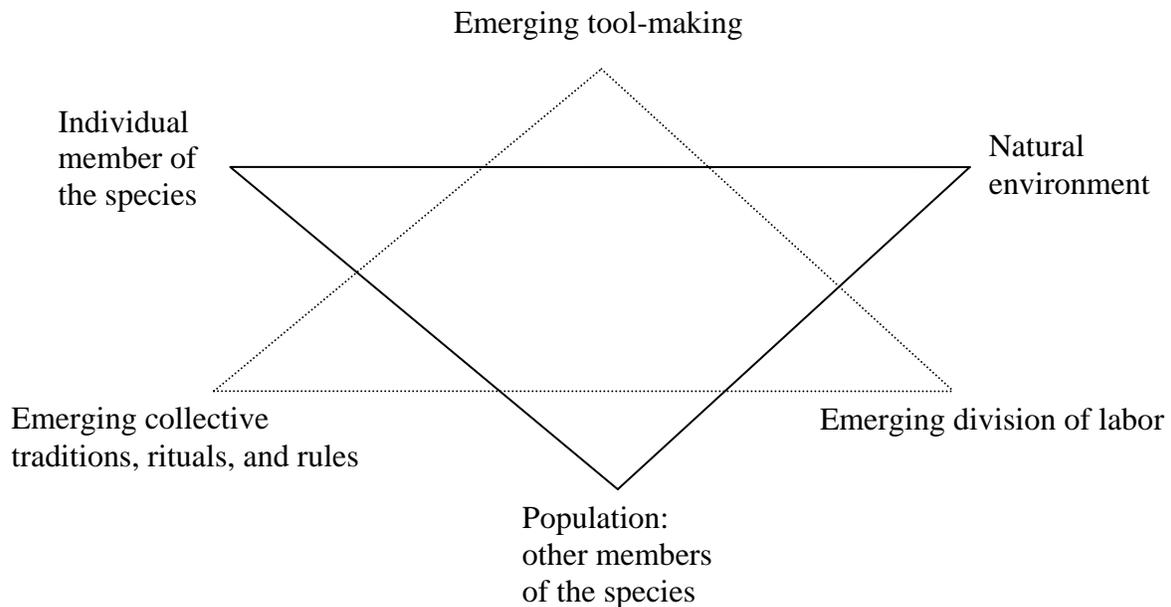


This was the first triangle. Engeström then turns to evolutionary biology for another triangular iteration. This time it is Lewontin’s more complex sketch of a “dialectical interaction between organism and environment”(Lewontin, 1982, quoted in Engeström, p. 74).



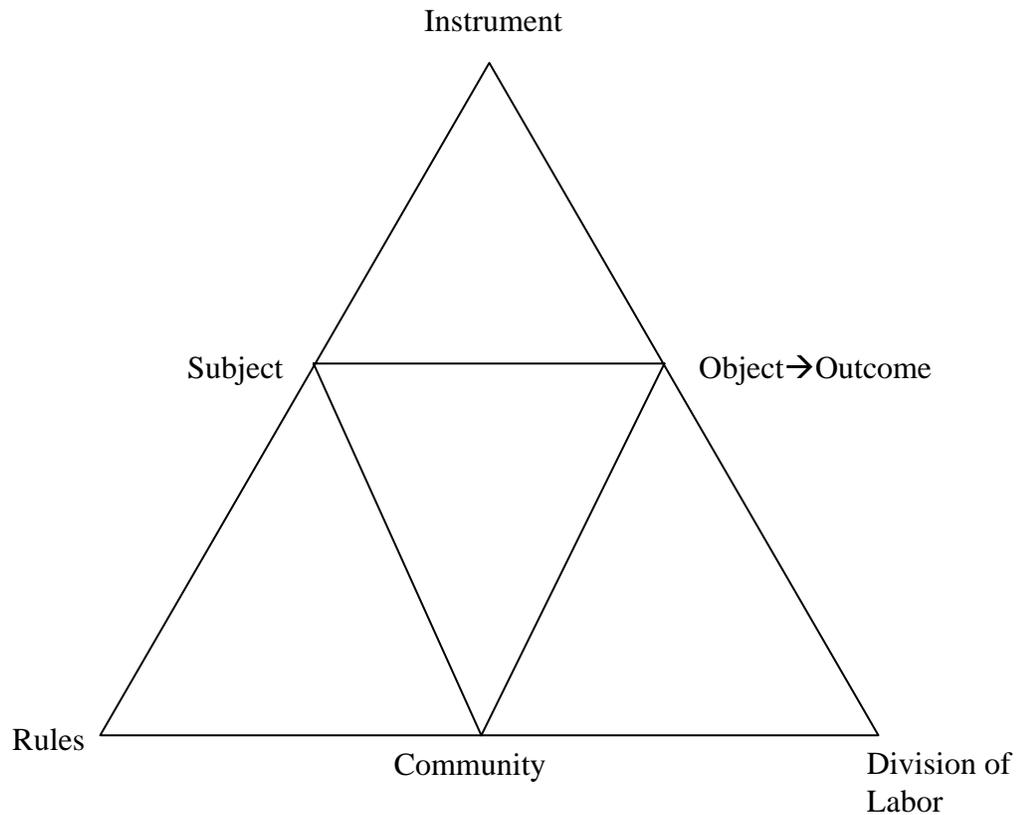
As Engeström points out, while this may work for animals, for humans the situation is different. In discussing how those differences came about, Engeström posits “ruptures” along each side of the triangle. These are evolutionary changes which disrupt the relationships outlined above and transform them into something new. In doing so, we get a new picture of the relationships and a sense of how human society has differentiated

itself from animal society. Adding rupture points along each side of the triangle creates a new triangle which Engeström draws like this (p. 76):



For each side of the triangle, the rupture creates a qualitatively new sort of relationship. Where once was an individual surviving alone in a natural environment, there now is a mediated relationship: tools change the way the individual interacts with the environment. Where once was an individual moving with a group of other individuals, there is now a mediated relationship: rules codify the way the individual interacts with others. Where once was a group surviving collectively in a natural environment, there now is a mediated relationship: divisions of labor transform what the collective can do in order to survive in the environment. This is the transformational power of disruption, and it is an important feature of Activity Theory. I will return to the idea of disruption, but for

now let us examine the final set of triangles which constitute Activity Theory as  
Engeström presents it:



The points of the triangle are all defined by the Elements of Activity. The claim of Activity Theory is that all human activity has these seven elements, and knowing these seven elements is necessary in order to have a deep understanding of the activity in question. Although some of the elements may be relatively self-explanatory, it is worth exploring each one in detail:

- The Subject: The subject is the doer of the action, the performer, the actor. The subject is usually an individual, but could be a group, depending on the level of analysis or the sort of analysis being done. The Subject would also vary depending on whose point of view the activity analysis took as primary. For example, an activity analysis of a sales conference could be done from the trainer's point of view, in which case the trainer(s) would be the subject(s), or the trainee's point of view, in which case the participant(s) would be the subject(s).
- The Object: It should be noted that in the course of the project I ended up coming to an understating of Object that differs from how it is typically conceived in the Activity Theoretical literature. Engeström's conception of Object is that it is the "true motive" of activity; hence the Object in Activity Theory is often conflated with the Objective of the activity. However, in explaining the Elements of Activity to the team members I was working with, I found that it made the most sense to them to describe the Object of Activity as being more analogous to the *object* in the sense of a direct-object of a verb. In the sentence, "The child kicked the ball", the ball is the direct-object of the verb "to kick". The ball is what is acted upon by the verb. For us, the Object in Activity Theory is similar; it is what is acted upon by the activity system. It is what (hopefully) changes as a result of the activity system working as it should. I will explore this variation in more detail below,

for now suffice it to say that for the purpose of this research, we conceived of object as *that which the Activity System is acting upon*.

- **The Outcome:** the outcome follows from the object, and is closer to what most people think of as a goal. As a result of the activity system acting upon an object, there is an outcome. The outcome comes from some transformation in the object. As a result of the change in the object, some outcome occurs. As a result of changes in sales representative behavior (the object of training), sales increased (the outcome). This is similar to Gilbert's concept of "Accomplishment", in that we can "...observe this thing that we have described when we are not actually observing the performer..." (Gilbert, 1978, p. 153). The increase in sales can be quantified in the absence of the sales representatives.
- **Instruments:** Also called Tools, these are not necessarily physical; they could be procedures and processes as well. Instruments are the means by which the Subject affects the Object.
- **Community:** Community can be analyzed in a couple of different ways. One way to think of the community is as a nexus of interested parties, i.e., stakeholders in the system. Alternatively, the Community might be the others who provide context for the work being done by a subject (or subjects). The key is that there has to be some shared element that defines a community across activity systems. For example, to continue with the sales training example, the sales representatives undergoing

training will be a relevant community for the sales trainers, and these two groups will (hopefully) share an object as they engage in the activity of training. Alternatively, the many individuals involved in designing and developing training might be a relevant community for sales trainers, even if they belong to different organizations or develop different sorts of training interventions. In this case, they share methodologies and ways of thinking; including the idea that focusing training on a certain object can lead to a desired outcome.

- Rules: This one is fairly self-explanatory. Rules can be written or unwritten, but they both constrain and justify action by the subjects. They govern what the subject can and can't do when using instruments to affect the object.
- Division of Labor: Similar to rules, the Division of Labor specifically addresses who can (or is expected) to do what. In every activity system, there evolves (or is created) a way of dividing up the labor so that the object can be worked on. Like Rules, Divisions of Labor both constrain and justify action.

Before proceeding, a bit more on the Object element. As Foot (2002) says, “The notion of object is a central, but frequently misunderstood, element of cultural-historical activity theory” (p. 132). It is frequently misunderstood because it is complex and complicated, and also because it is not well delineated in the literature. It was especially problematic for the application of Activity Theory that I had in mind, as so little of what

is published using Activity Theory is written for an audience that might seek to use Activity Theory as an analytical tool. However, that was exactly what I intended to do.

As I intended to use it as an analytical tool, I needed to be able to explain it to the members of the team I was working with; however, that proved to be difficult. Much of the difficulty in explaining the Object element to someone unfamiliar with Activity Theory lies in the fact that every Object in an Activity Theoretical sense is a complex, multi-faceted *something* with nebulous boundaries and indeterminate character—except where it’s a concrete something with hard boundaries and inviolate character. Both are possible. To differentiate between these two different types of Objects, Activity Theory makes a distinction between *Objekt*, which is closer to what in English might simply be called a “thing”, and *Gegenstand*, which “...adds the meaning of embedded in activity to *Objekt*” (Foot, 2002, p. 139). But even that is not a final characterization, as many Activity Theoretical researchers have reached for other images and conceptualizations to describe the *objects* of the Activity Systems they were examining, for example, the image of Object as “immutable mobile”, “mutable mobile”, or even “fire” (Law & Singleton, 2005).

A more fundamental problem that I faced in my attempt to explain Object to the team members that I was working with was that at the time the project began I was myself struggling with what in the world Object *was*. Unless and until I had some sense of Object that made sense to me, it was nearly impossible to satisfactorily explain it to anyone else. In the end (as mentioned above), the explanation that I settled on was that Object was analogous to the direct object of a verb in a sentence, it was what was acted upon by the Activity System. This made sense to all involved in the project, and it

allowed us to move forward with Activity Theory; it gave us a shared vocabulary and a workable (if idiosyncratic) understanding of the theory.

It should be acknowledged that this conception of Object is in fact a fairly radical departure from Activity Theory Orthodoxy (to the extent that there is an Activity Theory Orthodoxy), and that this new conceptualization has some theoretical implications. One of the most immediate is that it shifts the “true motive” of the activity from the Object element to the Outcome. Throughout the course of my work with the company, the work of the team always and inevitably had as its ultimate objective the outcome of Increased Sales. This objective was omnipresent. It is probably fair to wonder whether each and every individual was truly committed to that objective, or whether perhaps in expressing commitment to it they were just toeing the party line. A more traditional Activity Analysis might have made much of whether or not all of the Subjects in an Activity System were really working on or towards the same Object. In the case of this research, because I wanted to test Activity Theory’s efficacy as a tool, this was less of a concern. It was more important to see whether the tool could further the work of the group or not, rather than to see if everyone’s commitment to the final outcome was similar.

A further implication, again contrary to the sort of Activity Analysis more common in the literature, was that Object didn’t rise to a level of prominence vis-à-vis the other Elements of Activity. In many (though of course by no means all) Activity Analyses, because of the emphasis on Object and on how individuals come to their own understanding of the Objects of their work, the Object element becomes the sole focus of the analysis (Bruni, 2005; Engeström & Escalante, 1996; Suchman, 2005). Instead, what became paramount for this research was the idea, or concept, of the Elements of Activity,

along with the idea of Contradiction. These things became the primary focus of the work of the group, and ended up being the means by which Activity Theory was able to open up and lay bare some key insights for the group. (See Chapter 4 for details.)

Any Activity Analysis, then, must consider these seven Elements of Activity. Of course, every activity is in some sense unique, and not all the elements will always be key. Each must be considered, however, in order to determine which elements are the key to reaching a deep and useful understanding of the activity in question. That key will often turn out to be some sort of contradiction, or disruption.

Engeström identifies four levels of contradiction that can occur in human activity. These are hierarchical, and Engeström succinctly labels them Levels 1-4. Level 1 Primary Contradiction occurs when one of the elements contradicts itself; the contradiction is within that element of the activity. This occurs when one of the elements is forced into a dual role; for example a parent who is also a spouse, and has both a child and husband needing her attention. Right now. Or, as my (then) four-year-old son once said, “I’m a good boy. But I’m a bad boy too.” An example of a primary contradiction would be the conflict discussed earlier in this paper between the two purposes of this dissertation. On the one hand, I want to learn more about Activity Theory. On the other hand, I want to produce useful tools for the company. In the activity of “Writing a Dissertation”, the object (that which is being worked on) is the same: the dissertation. However, failure to achieve the latter goal might enhance the success of the former. That is potentially a primary contradiction in the Object of the activity of writing a dissertation. It may be that the object is not capable of bringing about both outcomes. In which case, either one or the other of the outcomes must be sacrificed, or the object must be changed in some way.

Level 2 Secondary Contradiction occurs when one element conflicts with another element in the activity. For example, a well-known Japanese proverb states that “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” This is a warning that it is best not to be different, better to match yourself to those around you. However, there are plenty of un-hammered nails gallivanting about Japan. They are walking secondary contradictions, bringing subject-community contradiction wherever they go. Another example would be when the right tool is not available for the job. At that time, a different tool might be pressed into service, but it is one which does not match well with the object being worked on.

Level 3 Tertiary Contradiction is a bit more complex. Engeström describes this as “...contradiction between the object/motive of the dominant form of the central activity and the object/motive of a culturally more advanced form of the central activity.” (p. 89) The point of a tertiary contradiction is that activities evolve; an activity may remain stable for some time, but at some point it will begin to change. At that point, there will arise a contradiction between the old way of doing things and the new way.

Although this is Engeström’s wording, I have to say that I am uncomfortable with saying that one of the objects is “...culturally more advanced...” This implies a judgment that I think limits the application of Activity Theory. To illustrate, one example of a Level 3 contradiction is the debate in US society at the time of this writing regarding extending the institution of marriage to include homosexuals. The *activity* of marriage is much the same, regardless of whether the persons in question are heterosexual or homosexual, but depending on what you think the *object* of marriage is, it is either blindingly obvious that society should sanction homosexual marriage, or it is patently ridiculous that anyone would seriously suggest that gays can or should marry. To

elaborate, if the object of marriage (that which is changed as a result of the activity of marriage) is reproduction (previously non-reproductive individuals become reproductive together), then it makes no sense for gays to marry. If, on the other hand, the object (that which is changed) is deepened love and commitment, then there is no reason why gays couldn't marry.<sup>4</sup> The conflict, then, is between the *objects* of the two Activity Systems of Marriage.

The whole issue of gay marriage is a highly charged one that society hasn't worked out yet; and therefore, although I do have a strong opinion on this matter, I am not willing to call one side or the other "...culturally more advanced..." Certainly I think in a generation's time the losing side will seem "backwards", and the fact that we so struggled with this issue will seem quaint. That's fine, but it is good and right that we struggle with this issue, and while we are in the midst of it, making statements about one side or the other being "...culturally more advanced..." simply serves to heighten acrimony rather than move towards resolution.

Activity Theory can help increase understandings by showing us that we are in a Level 3 contradiction, but a tool ought not to seem to pass judgment. Whether or not one side is "culturally more advanced" than another is something that the humans involved must (and will) decide, it is not for the tool to make such a statement.

Finally, Level 4 Quaternary Contradictions are contradictions between activity systems and neighboring activity systems. International trade provides a good example of this type of contradiction. Changes in the economic or political systems of one country can bring it into conflict with the economic or political systems of its trading partners. US

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<sup>4</sup> Granted, some individuals reject the notion that homosexuals love in the same manner that heterosexuals do, instead claiming that homosexuality is primarily driven by sexual desire, not true love. The conflict is still the same, though—object of marriage is love vs. object of marriage is sex.

steel tariffs, the EU's regulations regarding genetically modified foods, relaxation of economic restrictions in China, countless examples of this abound.

The interesting thing about Engeström's Level 4 is that it is potentially very useful, but rarely done because it is difficult and time-consuming to do convincingly. While it's easy to see how neighboring activities contradict each other, once you start examining neighboring activities, there are so many that trying to tease out specific effects and attribute them to specific neighboring activities becomes almost impossible. While you're concentrating on the activity itself (at levels 1 & 2), you can make useful pronouncements. Once you get outside the activity, it's all a rich maelstrom.

Leaving that problem aside for now, it should be clear why contradiction provides the driving power of Activity Theory. It is contradiction that drives change, and it is that dynamic that Activity Theory promises to be able to shed light on. As Engeström says, "Contradictions are not just inevitable features of activity...new qualitative stages and forms of activity emerge as solutions to the contradictions of the preceding stage of form" (p. 91). It is in seeking to resolve contradiction that breakthroughs occur. Of course, breakthroughs are not inevitable. Sometimes contradictions are more repaired than resolved. Or rather, they are resolved by one side "winning" and another "losing". True breakthroughs are the much sought after "win-win", where the contradiction is resolved through a new form of the activity which satisfies the conflicting elements without hammering them down.

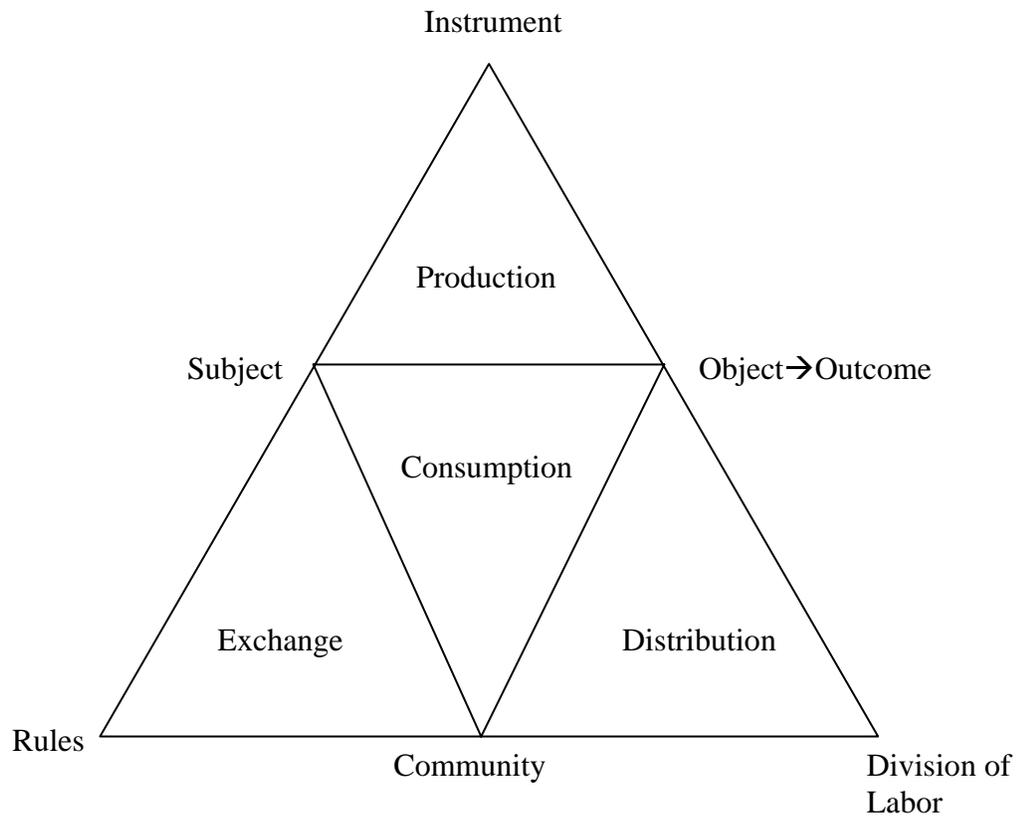
These two features of Activity Theory, the Elements of Activity and Disruptions (or Contradictions), form the basis of the work done for the company. Activity Theory is complex enough, and one of the decisions I had to make as I sought to make it useful for

the company was whether or not to try and introduce all of it to the team members, and if not what to include and what not to include. I decided that the Elements of Activity and the idea of Disruptions needed to stay, but there is more to the triangular shape of Activity Theory than I have yet elaborated; and while I didn't specifically incorporate it into the work done for the company, it did inform and provide background for the research done. As such, it deserves to be laid out in more detail here.

The triangle is the basic shape of Activity Theory. But why privilege the triangle as the final shape? Going back to an earlier representation, why not the 6 pointed star which showed so clearly the ruptures which are so important to Activity Theory? Engeström doesn't specifically address this question, but I think there are two important reasons. First of all, note which triangle is given the salient, larger, outside shape. It is the triangle that we saw above as being the triangle of rupture. This is the triangle that differentiates human activity from animal activity. It is given priority here in order to emphasize the human, i.e. constructed, nature of activity. All of the points of the triangle are defined by things that are socially negotiated or created: Rules, Instruments, and Division of Labor. All of these things, which Engeström presents as originally having been ruptures in the order of things, are transformed in human activity to the extent that, rather than being ruptures, they are now the defining elements of activity. What was once radical has become conservative (in the sense that it contains and gives stability and order). What was new has become old. Again, this is the transformational power of disruption, and the final shape also serves to remind us of the *human* part of human activity.

A second reason for using the triangle as the final shape for Activity Theory is a spatial one. It is interesting that a conceptual idea can be so driven by physical property, but one of the reasons for using a triangle as the outer shape is that when you join the elements, you automatically divide the space up into four smaller, inner triangles. These inner triangles are also important for Activity Theory, as the truth is that I have not yet shown it in its final form.

In addition to laying out the relationships between all the elements in human activity, Engeström defines the nature of the four triads. These are *production* (subject-instrument-object), *consumption* (subject-community-object), *exchange* (subject-rules-community), and *distribution* (community-division of labor-object). So in the end, Activity Theory actually looks like this:



The production triangle is relatively straightforward. Individuals (subjects) use instruments to affect or produce an object. The consumption triangle represents the process by which people and communities use objects in the course of their lives. Exchange and distribution are similar—exchange is the rule-based relationship between individuals and communities by which goods and services are shared, and distribution is the dividing up of objects to the members of the community. Although both are concerned with parceling out the fruits of society, they differ in where the emphasis is placed. With exchange, the emphasis is on the rule-based mediation between individuals and society. With distribution, the emphasis is on who takes these objects and gives them to the community in the first place.

I should emphasize here that the distinction between exchange and distribution is not (in my opinion) well delineated in Engeström's book. What I have written is my interpretation of where the differences lie. Engeström (1987, p. 78) merely quotes Marx from the introduction to *Grundrisse*:

Production creates the objects which correspond to the given needs; distribution divides them up according to social laws; exchange further parcels out the already divided shares in accord with individual needs; and finally, in consumption, the product steps outside this social movement and becomes a direct object and servant of individual need, and satisfies it in being consumed. (Marx, 1973)

However, I am not satisfied with that explanation, and will not consume it. Engeström may have been inspired by Marx to name his triangles as he did, but the way he lays them out is not consistent with what Marx has written. If distribution is division "according to social laws", then it should be on the bottom left with rules. But given that exchange is said to be further parceling "in accord with individual needs", then it does need to touch the subject element and subsequently it too needs to be on the left. Both occupy the same conceptual space, and it's difficult to explain how they are different.

A stronger reading of distribution and exchange should ground them solidly in their respective triads, as I have done. Throughout this dissertation, I will follow my interpretation of distribution and exchange, which I believe to be truer to Engeström's depiction of activity than Marx's.

This, then, will be the conceptual framework for the dissertation. In form, triangular; in function, contradictory. Contextually grounded in seven Elements and with an emphasis on the human (i.e. constructed) nature of activity, Activity Theory will give shape and sense to the data presented later.

Detailing the conceptual framework is of course important when reporting an analysis, but just as important is grounding the work in the literature that has come before. In the case of Activity Theory, there is a rich literature to draw upon, but it is a literature which is in some ways limited in its application.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

As mentioned above, there are some limitations in the work that has been published on Activity Theory. First of all, most of the published studies using Activity Theory are done in educational settings (Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch, Squire, & Keating, 2002; Diamondstone, 2002; Johnson, 2003; Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999; Lim & Hang, 2003; Onstenk, 2001). There is also some transitional work, which uses Activity Theory in educational settings whose goal is to train people for workplace environments (Ardichvili, 2003; Hansson, 2002). This is good and worthy research, but this dissertation seeks to use Activity Theory in workplace settings. Specifically, it seeks to use Activity Theory as a lens for developing and customizing training in an international setting; and there is very little out there that is specific enough that it could be used by someone hoping to do an Activity Analysis for a business client in such a setting. Much of what is in the literature concentrates on extending understandings about social systems. Even where it's been used in workplace settings, Activity Theory has been used as a framework for creating understandings, for peering under the hood of the workplace dynamics. It is not seen as a tool for changing or manipulating the dynamics in order to affect a certain outcome.

There are of course exceptions to this, perhaps the most practical being Daisy Mwanza's article using Activity Theory to frame the design of computer systems (2001). This is an almost step-by-step guide for using Activity Theory in design which anyone interested in practical applications of Activity Theory should definitely read. (As of July 2005, the paper is available online at <http://kmi.open.ac.uk/publications/pdf/kmi-01-7.pdf>)

Indeed, much of the work I did with the company I worked with is based on the work that Mwanza did in 2001.

Another article that uses Activity Theory as a tool for bringing about change in a workplace setting is Blackler, Crump & McDonald's (2000) work with a firm in the UK which they called "HighTech". Here, Blackler et al make clear the questions they used to frame their analysis, and share the recommendations (which they call "suggestions") they made to the company. Though not as explicit as Mwanza, there is enough detail here to suggest a methodology for using Activity Theory to meet business needs.

One caveat about Blackler et al is that they map onto Activity Theory, with very little discussion, some terminology from Boland & Tenkasi (1995) about Perspective Making, Perspective Taking, and Perspective Shaping, which they use to replace Activity Theory's Division of Labor, Rules, and Tools, respectively. Although there is no inherent problem with modifying a tool for use in a particular environment, it would have been nice to see why they thought those particular replacements were theoretically justified, but we get no such discussion.

In addition to the above, there are several other published articles in refereed journals wherein the authors clearly used Activity Theory to meet business needs, but there was not enough detail in the articles for a practitioner to walk away from them with the sense that they'd acquired a new tool for use in business settings. These include Bødker & Grønboek (1998) on user prototyping of new computer systems for Danish municipal workers; Engeström (2000) on a Children's Hospital in Helsinki; and Seppänen's (2002) work with organic farmers in Finland.

But for the most part, even when Activity Theory has been used in workplace settings, there is little to no indication in the published articles that Activity Theory was used to make recommendations for change. It is certainly possible that recommendations were in fact made but the authors of the articles didn't discuss them because it wasn't of interest to the academic audience. It is also possible that no recommendations were made at all, and that the companies involved merely granted the researchers access in order to further the pool of knowledge in the world. Nothing in the literature helps make this determination.

Some of the recent work in Activity Theory that falls into this latter category are Heath & Luff's (1998) work with line control (train lines, not people queuing) on the London Underground; Hutchins & Klausen's (1998) work on distributed cognition in an airline cockpit; Garpenholt, Fredlund, & Timpka's (2001) work following the introduction of a flu vaccine in Sweden; Artemeva & Freedman's (2001) work with an engineering firm which spontaneously combusted in the middle of the research; and Clancey's (2002) work with an arctic research station simulating work on Mars. In all of these settings, Activity Theory was used to lay out the nature of the work being done. In none of these settings were the results of the analysis used to make suggestions about how the work might be improved.

Activity Theory has also rarely been used in cross-cultural workplace settings. This is somewhat surprising, given that the elements of activity touch upon much of what constitutes human culture—the social rules, the divisions of labor, the particular (perhaps unique) instruments and tools that people use to accomplish tasks—all of which should mean that Activity Theory would be a useful tool for analyzing disruptions brought about

when two (or more) cultures come into contact with one another. Where it has been used internationally, it has been used to lay out the nature of the work, or to illustrate national differences. Recent work which falls into this mold include Engeström’s (1998) piece looking at courtrooms processing drunk driving convictions in Finland and California, and Shaiken’s (1998) work at a pair of “Universal Motors” maquiladora plants.

Putting all of this into a matrix reveals an interesting lacuna. Plotting Activity Theory studies that were used internationally vs. those that weren’t against those that were used for business ends vs. those that weren’t results in the following:

	Not used for business ends	Used for business Ends
Not International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Heath &amp; Luff, 1998)—Line control on the London underground</li> <li>• (Hutchins &amp; Klausen, 1998)—Distributed cognition in an airline cockpit.</li> <li>• (Garpenholt, Fredlund, &amp; Timpka, 2001)—Introduction of the flu vaccine immunization process in Sweden.</li> <li>• (Artemeva &amp; Freedman, 2001)—An engineering firm that spontaneously combusted.</li> <li>• (Clancey, 2002)—Simulating conditions on Mars in an arctic research station.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Bødker &amp; Grønboek, 1998)—User prototyping of new computer systems for Danish municipal government workers.</li> <li>• (Engeström, 2000)—A children's hospital in Helsinki.</li> <li>• (Mwanza, 2001)—HCI design.</li> <li>• (Seppänen, 2002)—Organic Farmers in Finland.</li> <li>• (Blackler, Crump, &amp; McDonald, 2000)—Analysis of the UK firm “High Tech”.</li> </ul>
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Engeström, 1998)—Courtroom processing of drunk driving convictions in Finland and CA.</li> <li>• (Shaiken, 1998)—“Universal Motors” maquiladora plants.</li> </ul>	

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all the work published using Activity Theory in workplace settings in the last seven-plus-or-minus-two years. This is a

sampling of the work that is out there. The lacuna identified above is real though. There is a dearth of work done using Activity Theory to meet business needs in international settings. This dissertation will be one step towards filling that gap.

But why Activity Theory? Surely there are other possible theoretical orientations that could potentially work just as well for illuminating cultural differences. This is most certainly true. There are indeed other such orientations, such as Actor-Network Theory, Socio-Technical Theory (also called the “Socio-technical Systems”, or STS, approach), Sociocultural Theory of Mediated Action, Legitimate Peripheral Participation, and Frame Analysis. In addition, while there is no named theoretical orientation associated with it, much of the ground covered in Dupuy’s book The Customer’s Victory (Dupuy, 1999) is relevant here and deserves some comment. While all of these theories have their strengths, it was my desire to do something practical—to use the theory as a tool—that made Activity Theory the most appealing to me. None of the other theories seemed to lend themselves to that sort of adaptation in quite the way Activity Theory would, nor did the other theories seem to fit the situation of the company quite as well.

For example, Engeström and his co-editors, in the introduction to the edited book Perspectives on Activity Theory (Engeström, Mietinen, & Punamäki, 1999) identify both the Sociocultural Theory of Mediated Action and the Theory of Situated Learning, or Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), as being “...particularly close to activity theory.” (p. 11) According to them, the difference between Activity Theory and Sociocultural Theory is that with Sociocultural Theory, “The focus is on the individual performing actions in a sociocultural setting” (p. 11), with an emphasis on the signs and socio-linguistic cues that mediate that interaction. In contrast, Activity Theory focuses on

the Activity System itself. Any individuals involved are of course considered, but they're considered as one of the elements of activity, not as the focus of the inquiry. And the mediation involved in Activity Theory can of course encompass the signs and socio-linguistic cues that individuals use (either making them one of the Tools the Subject uses to affect the Object, or one of the Rules that mold the actions of the Subject working to affect the Object), but such things are only one sort of the many mediators that govern the relationship between Subject and Object.

As such, Activity Theory seemed a better candidate for the research here. Had the situation been slightly different, and a particular individual (or individuals) been the focus of the investigation, then Sociocultural Theory may have been better. As it was, no specific individual was the focus of the research, and indeed we didn't know going in exactly what part of the system would turn out to be salient. Hence a theoretical orientation that allowed for more possibilities seemed more appropriate.

As for Situated Learning, or LPP, Engeström et al identify the problem with this theoretical orientation as being "...in the *temporal* dimension. The theory of legitimate peripheral participation depicts learning and development primarily as a one-way movement from the periphery, occupied by novices, to the center, inhabited by experienced masters of the given practice" (p. 12, italics in original). For its part, Activity Theory has no such directional component. Activity Systems evolve in particular sorts of ways, and individuals and communities move about vis-à-vis one another within these systems, but there is no a priori assumption about what direction that movement might take. Again, given the unstructured nature of the problem, Activity Theory's openness regarding any sort of flow of integration into the system made it a better analytic tool.

Actor-Network Theory is a bit more complex, and deserves a short introduction. Begin with what it's not. As Bruno Latour emphatically points out in his chapter in the edited book Actor-Network Theory and After, it's not a theory that looks at the interaction of an agent vis-à-vis an external environment. The point of Actor-Network Theory was to bypass the debate about the individual/social dichotomy and to show that actors and networks are more intimately related than such dichotomies suggest. Latour talks of the "circulating" of the actor and the network. Part of what constitutes the actor also constitutes the network, and part of what constitutes the network also constitutes the actor, and these things circulate within themselves, phenotypically appearing as what looks like two different things: an actor and a network. Actor-Network Theory seeks to move beyond that dichotomy and examine actors in their local contexts, without tripping on the tension between seeking to explain their situations largely in macro-social terms or largely in micro-individual terms. "Far from being a theory of the social or even worse an explanation of what makes society exert pressure on actors, it always was, and this from its very inception...a very crude method to learn from the actors without imposing on them an a priori definition of their world-building capacities" (Latour, 1999).

This is an important point of difference with Activity Theory, which does seek in the activity system that which provides some explanatory power about what it is that people do. Activity Theory is of course not unaware of the fact that actors (or subjects, to use Activity Theory's terminology) affect their networks (activity systems) just as much—or sometimes more—than their networks affect them. But with its elements of activity, it goes beyond that to look at how all of the elements (Subject, Tools, Rules, Community, Division of Labour, Object, Outcome) interact. As such, Activity Theory

seemed a better fit for the purposes of this dissertation. By providing more data points for laying out the Activity System, Activity Theory promises to be more specific in its outputs, which should be more pleasing to the business audience for whom this work was done.

As for Socio-Technical Theory, it too looks like a reasonable candidate for framing the sort of work I wanted to do here. It is workplace-based, having been born in the coal mines of Wales (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). It looks not just at the technical aspect of the work, but the social as well—emphasizing that often great gains in productivity can be had through attending to the social side of the equation. And it is relatively well known in the HPT literature. Still, Activity Theory seemed a better candidate for this research. Without claiming that they are unrelated, Socio-Technical Theory looks at the human system(s) as something separate from and distinct from the technical systems. In Activity Theory, it's all analyzed at once. Socio-Technical Theory also puts more emphasis on the group (group work and action teams) than the individual. Again, Activity Theory looks at both, whichever is more appropriate for the system as it is, with no a priori assumptions about which is more important. Also, for all that Activity Theory's methodology is not always nicely spelled out in the literature; at least with the elements of activity you have something concrete to hang the analysis on.

Goffman's Frame Analysis (Goffman, 1986) is somewhat problematic. Those familiar with this work would no doubt think of it upon hearing of Activity Theory. It purports to explain how it is that we humans organize and thus make sense of both the raw physical data that our senses perceive and the social milieus within which we operate. And indeed, especially when it comes to Subject—Community interactions, Frame

Analysis can be an enlightening lens with which to look at a situation. But there are several problems as well. Goffman himself, in the introduction to his book, states that, “This book is about the organization of experience—something that an individual actor can take into his mind—and not the organization of society...I am not addressing the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives” (p. 13). Well, Activity Theory also is rarely applied to society as a whole, focusing instead on specific activities. Yet Activity Theory would reject an analysis focused primarily on an individual, and in this sense the objection to Frame Analysis as a potential alternative theoretical framework for this study is similar to the objection to Sociocultural Theory. Any individuals involved are of course considered, but they’re considered as one of the elements of activity, not as the focus of the inquiry.

Having said that, at those moments when Activity Theory leads us to suspect that something that an individual in the Subject element is doing is somehow germane to the activity as a whole, Frame Analysis can provide a useful lens for further examining that particular element and laying open for scrutiny some of the *why* of their actions, or at the very least it provides an alternative explanation with a different focus. Thus it would be possible to use Frame Analysis in conjunction with Activity Theory; as a way of generating alternative hypotheses about individual human action.

In addition to the above theoretical orientations, Dupuy is worth mentioning. In The Customer’s Victory (1999), he explores the implications of a world in which the customer has “won” over the companies that supply said customer with the products and services they daily consume, specifically the implications for companies and how they will need to restructure/reorganize/rethink in response to this. The framework laid out in

the book might not constitute an alternative theoretical orientation to Activity Theory, but it certainly covers much of the same ground as this study. Indeed, in attempting to break what organizations say they are from what they actually do, and to show how that break is omnipresent and ever ignored, Dupuy in some sense captures what I was hoping to be able to do by using Activity Theory as a tool with a purpose and not merely a theoretical framework for illuminating human action. From Dupuy's introduction:

This there are good reasons for reconsidering the distinction between structure and organization in an attempt to understand why these concepts have been confused for so long...Concerning the idea that organizations do not operate according to their own rules and procedures—and that, moreover, if they did, they would be unable to function at all—not only do [business executives] all agree, but they provide plenty of examples to illustrate the point...Yet, when asked to describe their own organization, they immediately turn to the official chart and most go no further....By invoking official charts and procedures, they feel as though they are being concrete since they are speaking about what is visible and immediately visualizable (p.22).

Clearly, Dupuy is covering much the same ground that Activity Theory would cover when applied to a for-profit entity. Dupuy is especially strong on what in an Activity Analysis would be the Rules element. Time and again he returns to the importance of the procedures that companies have in place, especially bureaucratic ones, and their implications. His analysis is rich, but at the same time it leaves us with the same concentration on what in Activity Theory would be just one of the Elements of Activity. If we needed a theoretical framework that focused an analysis on what Activity Theory would call the Rules, then Dupuy's book is a good starting point. Otherwise, like Frame Analysis, it would best be used to supplement Activity Theory and lay open for further scrutiny some of the action in the Rules element. (Which, if Dupuy is correct, will certainly be there.)

### Chapter Three: Methodology

The research methodology used here is that of a descriptive, exploratory case study (Yin, 1994), with an instrumental (Stake, 1995) orientation. The descriptive case seeks to tell what was as it was, using tools (in this case Activity Theory) to lay open the rich structure of a real-life phenomenon. Issues of generalizability always arise with case studies, especially one-case studies like this one. This is perhaps even more true of descriptive studies. I address the issue of generalizability in two ways, first, in keeping with the descriptive orientation of the study, by taking a cue from Mwanza 2001 and laying out clearly how we did what we did, so that readers can make a better judgment about whether what we did would be worth incorporating into their own practice; thus trusting to the reader's own sense of rightness as to whether or not insights reported here are applicable to their own situations. Secondly, and for the purpose of contributing to knowledge perhaps more importantly, by using the exploratory nature of the study and generalizing to the theory itself.

As for the instrumental orientation of the study, Stake identifies two types of case study, the *intrinsic*, wherein "We are interested in it, not because by studying it we learn about other cases or about some general problem, but because we need to learn about that particular case." (p. 3), and the *instrumental*, used when we have "...a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case." (p.3). Stake goes on to point out that dropping cases into one category or another is no easy task, "(often we cannot decide)" (p.4), but the categories do affect how the researcher approaches the data and what is done with the analysis.

In the case of this dissertation, because I am interested in testing an application of Activity Theory, and because I'd like to take what was learned here and eventually expand it to other cases, I take an instrumental orientation. Ideally, with an instrumental orientation, there would be more than one case examined. However, life is not ideal. Given that one of the goals of this research is to enable multinational companies everywhere to more skillfully navigate issues of culture, there is definitely the hope that what is found here will turn out to be relevant for other companies in other, similar, situations. However, that follow-up will have to wait for further study.

It is worth pausing for a moment and delineating what is meant by a descriptive, exploratory instrumental case. Like Activity Theory and international business, Yin and Stake are not usually folded together like this. It is perhaps more accurate to say that this is a descriptive, exploratory case study which will hopefully have instrumental application. It is a descriptive study in the sense that it tells the story of what the company did and how we approached the application of Activity Theory to the challenges it faced. Thus the narrative of the Findings section will be chronological, showing how our thinking progressed from our early understandings to our later understandings. It is an exploratory study to the extent that it seeks to break new ground by applying Activity Theory in a setting it hasn't previously been applied, and in a way it hasn't previously been applied. Thus the theoretical discussion of Chapter 5 will seek to generalize to the theory, illustrating and illuminating some of the strengths and weaknesses of Activity Theory itself.

But while the research heart of the study seeks to add to knowledge about Activity Theory, it would be a waste to allow this case to sit in isolation. To the extent that the

issues and challenges faced by this company are similar to ones faced by other companies that operate across cultural and political borders, the solutions and conclusions to which we came ought to be enlightening for such other companies. And I certainly hoped that the company I worked with would be able to internalize some of what we learned and apply it again to different but related issues that they faced. Hence, while a case study, this research does share some of the characteristics of action research. As Carr and Kemmis say, “There are two essential aims of all action research, to *improve* and to *involve*” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986); both of those aims were part of this research. Unlike action research, however, I wasn’t really seeking any sort of radical structural change.

Carr & Kemmis again:

Action research is simply a form of reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (p. 162).

I wasn’t really seeking to “improve the justice” of the situation (though of course, if we had identified some grave injustice going on, we would have addressed it). That might have been interesting, but unlike most action research it wasn’t part of the agenda.

Instead, we sought to improve the efficiency and efficacy of the work being done by the global group by using this meso level theory as a framework for creating shared understandings (Schwen, Evans, & Kalman, 2005) among the team members and other stakeholders about the work (and workings) of the global group, while simultaneously seeking an increased theoretical understanding of Activity Theory.

The background of the problem and the company which is the focus of this case have been detailed above. This chapter will outline the methods used to collect and analyze the data. Before I outline the specific methods used, however, I should pause to

make explicit the distinction between methods and methodology, and make clear what is going on in this dissertation.

Methods are the specific ways in which researchers collect their data (or do their work); another way to think of it might be as the tools they use. Methodology is the system of methods. A researcher's epistemological orientation will determine their methodology, irrespective of their methods. In the case of this dissertation, my relatively Postpositivist (Phillips & Burbules, 2000) epistemology means that the methods outlined below were chosen for their ability to hook up with and be pushed in certain directions by reality. Activity Theory's epistemology, grounded as it is in the activity system, means that the methods below were chosen for their ability to reveal the workings of the elements of activity and the contradictions between and among them. The methodology of this dissertation, then, focuses on letting reality push in ways that reveal the workings of the activity system.

It should be acknowledged that most Activity Theoretical researchers would take a different epistemological orientation. At the very least, they are far more interested in the *situated* nature of activity (Barab, Hay, & Yamagata-Lynch, 2001); many take a post-modernist Marxist approach (personal communication, Holzman, 2005). This is of course not to say that the epistemological orientation that I adopted is wrong or bad, nor that it is wrong or bad to try and use Activity Theory in this way. To the contrary, it is interesting to see what a post-positivist can do with Activity Theory when seeking to use it as an analytical tool. At the same time, I do understand and acknowledge that epistemologically, this research is not in line with Activity Theory orthodoxy.

## **Data Collection**

There were three main methods and one secondary method of data collection employed throughout the course of this research. The main methods were participation, observation, and interview. The first two occurred essentially simultaneously, though typically with emphasis on one or the other, while interviews were primarily used to check validity and explore the possibility of new avenues of inquiry. The secondary method was document analysis. Typically, analysis of documents can be a rich source of data. In this case, however, there simply weren't many documents to analyze. Most of the meaty interactions went on in the discussions that happened in the process of producing the documents. The documents themselves, such as Participant Guides or Facilitator's Guides for specific training interventions, ended up not being as interesting or enlightening. In addition, because the emphasis was on creating new sorts of interactions with the affiliates, what historical (i.e., old) documents that did exist served only to highlight what the approach used to be, not what it was going to be. Of course, knowing what was important, and older documents were examined with that in mind; but the bulk of the data came from participation, observation, and interview.

In the case to be explored in this dissertation, I took a participant-observer role. I was initially contracted to help customize and otherwise prepare the Senior Sales Manager training program for Sales Managers in Japan. The Senior Sales Manager Program (SSMP) is run several times throughout the year at various locations all over the world. Being one of the largest overseas markets for the company, Japan has its own SSMP (other countries with their own SSMPs are Canada, China, and the US). Another unique aspect to the Japan SSMP is that it is done in Japanese. At the time, Japan was the

only affiliate where these types of training sessions were done in the native language, in the rest of the world, they're done in English<sup>5</sup>. Japan got Japanese simply because the level of English ability of the managers there wasn't sufficient to allow the training to be done in English. Given my background and experience with Japan, the company felt that I would be able to positively contribute to the preparation.

In the end, the Japan SSMP project ended up expanding to the point where I actually went to Japan and delivered some of the training materials that I'd been involved in helping to customize. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to stay around after the training and talk in-depth with some of the Japanese Senior Sales Managers (SSMs). The business needs of the Japan affiliate simply didn't allow for the SSMs to take the time to do that. However, the experience of going over and delivering the training was certainly valuable, and I got much interesting data as a result.

I should emphasize here that the company (rightly, I do believe) was not interested in helping me with my research simply for the sake of helping me with my research. Of course, they were at every point highly supportive of my goal of becoming a PhD, and I received great encouragement from all concerned as I worked towards my goal. At the same time, they were concerned with their business needs, and made sure that the work I did fit their needs. As I said, this is as it should be, and I wanted it that way myself. However, as with the Japan example above, it does mean that I was sometimes constrained in how and where I could get data. Most of the data here is taken from projects that I worked on, and always from the side of the team that I was working with. While it would have been nice to talk more with the consumers of the products we produced, it simply wasn't possible.

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<sup>5</sup> There is talk of changing this for some of the other major non-English speaking affiliate countries.

The final method of data collection that I employed was the interview. Whether participating or observing, I always tried to take the time to jot down what was happening and reflect on it as soon as I could. I would then schedule some time with the manager of the team, or sometimes with individual team members, depending on what I felt was more appropriate (it was usually with the manager). At those meetings, I would share my observations and check to see if the team member had any objections, ameliorations, or re-conceptualizations. Any new insights I got from these interviews were then used in the data analysis.

In addition, after the Japan project, we expanded our area of inquiry to include other SSMPs and other training modules and sessions. To collect data about these other interventions, I relied primarily on interview. In some of these cases we formally debriefed using a debriefing tool based on Activity Theory, in other cases I was following up with individuals on comments they had made in meetings as they developed and planned implementation for certain interventions. As all of the interventions involved team effort, I was always able to talk to at least two people (often three or more) about all the interventions. This helped build a richer, more nuanced picture of what went on, even if I myself did not participate to the extent that I participated in the Japan program.

## **Data Analysis**

I used two different strategies to analyze the data; the findings (detailed in the next chapter) came in two phases. The first strategy that used was based on the questions found in Mwanza's work, the other on the graphical representation of Activity Theory found in Engeström's work. The first set of findings came early in the research as I

prepared for and synthesized everything I'd learned from the Japan project. The second phase came later, after I incorporated more data from other interventions. As for the data analysis itself, more progress was made with Mwanza's questions, though both methods showed potential for adding value.

*Mwanza's Questions*

In her 2001 piece (op. cit.), Mwanza presents what she calls the Eight-Step Model for examining a situation. Taking the elements of Activity Theory, she develops each into a specific question:

1. *Activity* of interest—What sort of activity am I interested in?
2. *Object* or *Objective* of activity—Why is this activity taking place?
3. *Subjects* in this activity—Who is involved in carrying out this activity?
4. *Tools* mediating the activity—By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity?
5. *Rules* and regulations mediating the activity—Are there any cultural norms, rules or regulations governing the performance of this activity?
6. *Division of labour* mediating the activity—Who is responsible for what, when carrying out this activity and how are the roles organized?
7. *Community* in which activity is conducted—What is the environment in which this activity is carried out?
8. What is the desired *Outcome* form carrying out this activity?

(Mwanza, 2001; italics and British spelling in original)

Mwanza further repackages Activity Theory by removing the elements of Activity Theory from their place in Engeström's triangles and instead presents them as combinations:

Actors (Doers)		Mediator		Objective (Purpose)
Subjects	~	Tools	~	Object
Subjects	~	Rules	~	Object
Subjects	~	Division of Labour	~	Object
Community	~	Tools	~	Object
Community	~	Rules	~	Object
Community	~	Division of Labour	~	Object

(Mwanza, 2001)

These six combinations then yield a new set of questions:

- What *Tools* does the *Subjects* use to achieve their *Objective* and how?
- What *Rules* affect the way the *Subjects* achieve their *Objective* and how?
- How does the *Division of Labour* influence the way the *Subjects* satisfy their *Objective*?
- How do the *Tools* in use affect the way the *Community* achieves the *Objective*?
- What *Rules* affect the way the *Community* satisfies their *Objective* and how?
- How does the *Division of Labour* affect the way the *Community* achieves the *Objective*?

(Mwanza, 2001; italics and British spelling in original)

Although I originally used Mwanza's wording, one of the first adaptations I made for the company was to change some of that wording to more closely match the phrasing used by the company. For example, I changed "Community" to "Stakeholder Groups", and "Division of Labor" to "Roles and Responsibilities".

These questions and the Eight-Step Model were then used to frame the inquiry. The goal was to get people thinking about the elements of activity and collect information about the system. With the Eight-Step Model, the information is still relatively discreet. (Who are the Subjects? What is the Outcome?) With the questions in Table 1, some of the interactions begin to come to the surface. We began our analysis of the system (the Japan SSMP) with the Eight-Step Model, then moved to the questions in Table 1. The next step was to use that information with Engeström's graphical representation of Activity Theory and look for important contradictions.

It is worth pausing now and delineating exactly what our answers to the questions posed by the Eight-Step Model were. In doing so it should be noted that, contrary to what would have been ideal, there was not one meeting on a particular day with the members of the global group wherein we sat down with these questions and came up with these answers. Instead, I met individually at some point or other with all of the members of the

group and went over these questions with them. The answers listed below are an amalgamation of the answers people came up with; they represent the answers of the group *members*, and thus the understanding the group members had during this early phase of the project, but they are not answers that were arrived at jointly. Subsequently, I have tried to be cautious and not think of these answers as being the answers *of the group*. Nonetheless, in practice I probably ended up treating them as such.

Our answers were as follows:

1. *Activity* of interest—What sort of activity am I interested in?

Our first answer was that the activity is the Japan Training Program. We later applied some of the tenets of Activity Theory to the activity of *preparing* for the training program, but in the beginning we focused on the training program itself. Even later in the research, we applied the idea of the Activity of Interest to other programs being run in other countries, but by that time some of the wording of Activity Theory had been internalized enough that we never returned to the full Eight-Step Model for the other SSMPs.

2. *Object* or *Objective* of activity—Why is this activity taking place?

To increase the coaching skills of Regional Sales Managers; and to create alignment and support for some of the critical business initiatives. It should be noted that I have come to believe that the prompt question here (“Why is this activity taking place?”) is not the right one, though it is the one Mwanza uses, and it is the one we used at the time. As mentioned above in the discussion on Activity Theory, I now believe that the Object is better described through the metaphor of the direct object of a verb: it is that which is acted on by the Activity System. Therefore a better prompt question would be: What will change as a result of this activity? The prompt question is not a bad one though, as it gets

us in the right vicinity. I nonetheless think it is more accurate to say of this case that the Objects of the activity were 1) the coaching skills of the Regional Sales Managers, and 2) the alignment and support in the Japan (and, later, other) affiliate(s) for some of the critical business initiatives. Such a wording makes it more clear exactly what we were hoping to affect by holding the training program in the first place, and serves to differentiate this question more clearly from the question of outcome (below).

3. *Subjects* in this activity—Who is involved in carrying out this activity?

For the Japan project, we listed five individuals by name (trainers and managers from Global and Japan, and a director from Japan), and the following classes of individuals: the Japan Training Dept., the Regional Sales Managers, the Business Unit Directors, and the National Sales Team Leaders. We had similar answers, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other SSMPs that we looked at later.

4. *Tools* mediating the activity—By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity?

We had an extensive list here, among the items: the Selling Process Workshop, the District Focus Week review, the role-plays, the case studies, the equipment, the room, etc.

5. *Rules* and regulations mediating the activity—Are there any cultural norms, rules or regulations governing the performance of this activity?

For this question too we had a long list; highlights include: hierarchy in age and rank, company initiatives, don't speak first (for Japan and later Asia), defer to bosses, share your experiences, make the training realistic and relevant! Etc. Unlike the tools question, which we rarely revisited once we had made our initial list, we were constantly discussing rules (both formal and informal, written and unwritten) as we prepared for the Japan program and reflected on the other SSMPs.

6. *Division of labour* mediating the activity—Who is responsible for what, when carrying out this activity and how are the roles organized?

In answering this question we merely listed the individuals involved in the training and the tasks that they would perform there.

7. *Community* in which activity is conducted—What is the environment in which this activity is carried out?

Here we listed the company, the affiliate country or region, various divisions within the company, the company's peers in their country or region, etc.

8. What is the desired *Outcome* from carrying out this activity?

Enhanced District Sales Manager Performance, increased sales, and movement up the list of companies in the industry as ranked by sales.

As mentioned above, we then went on to use the six combination questions to probe the interactions between some of the elements of activity. Contrary to the data we were able to put together for the Eight-Step Model, however, we never ended up with a full list of answers to the six combination questions. The reason is that we used those questions in a slightly different way. We used the Eight-Step Model more as an introductory tool, as a way to get everyone on the same page and thinking about the issues in the same way. We used the combination questions in the heat of the moment, as we worked on specific problems or issues. An example will serve to illustrate: One of my first priorities as I came on the project was to try and get a sense of how things differed in the Japan affiliate of this company compared to how things were done (or expected to be done) by the Global group based in the US. It was interesting that at the same time, the Japanese individual who was in charge of the project was engaged in a similar quest to develop his own sense of the differences between the two entities, with the (obvious) difference being that he came at things from the perspective of a Japanese national living

temporarily in the States. The eight years I had spent in Japan served me well, as we conversed at least as much in Japanese as we did in English. We were also able to relate to each other well, as we had the common experience of living and working abroad.

At one point in the project this individual and I were thinking about the issue raised by the first of the six combination questions, what tools do the subjects use to achieve their objective, and how? We had rewritten that to make it more specific to the problem we were working on: What tools (resources) do the Japanese sales managers have for coaching? Specifically, we were discussing whether there was a good match between the tools (resources) the company provided the managers and the Japanese way of doing things. We were especially concerned about the tool that we were responsible for, the training program that we were developing. In the course of our conversation about this topic, my counterpart shared an observation that he had had about one of the differences between the two countries, “America is explain and understand. Japan is imply and perceive.” He then went on to note that when lecturing, Americans like to emphasize facts and logic to convince their listeners, while in Japan, speakers use stories and feelings to move them.<sup>6</sup>

Talking with the sales trainers about the same topic, I found they had a more specific concern: “Discussion has to be handled differently there,” I was told, “you can’t just throw out a topic and expect them to jump in. If you call on someone, they’ll answer, but they won’t jump in.”<sup>7</sup> This last observation was particularly widely shared. It was already part of the background knowledge of the trainers in the group. There is a discussion component to nearly every training program, and the members of the global

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<sup>6</sup> I defer to his experience on lecturers in Japan; while there, I did not have the opportunity to listen to many speeches.

<sup>7</sup> Personal conversation with team members

group all had strategies for running those discussions differently depending on what country they were in. “In Japan, you have to call on people” was already ingrained knowledge.

This then is an example of how discussion that resulted from asking some of Mwanza’s questions led to interesting and fruitful insights, in this case highlighting and opening up for discussion some of how the cultural differences played out in the tools used to affect the object (in this case, the act of coaching sales representatives), and in the rules for behavior that meant that some instructional strategies couldn’t simply be taken across the Pacific and used in the same manner that they could be in the US.

### *Engeström’s Triangles*

Having gotten a sense of the system by using Mwanza’s questions, the goal now was to use the triangular formation of Activity Theory to plot that information and look for contradictions. I had originally hoped that this work could be done collaboratively, however, in practice that didn’t happen. While I was able to get time with people to discuss the Mwanza questions, I was not able to get time with people to actually map them and discuss the triangles. Subsequently, I ended up doing much of this work myself.

I think that part of the problem here was that the unfamiliar graphic was off-putting. People weren’t familiar with the triangular layout of Activity Theory, and it interfered with the analysis itself. Also, since the questions derived from Mwanza’s work proved sufficient to help people come to interesting insights about the Activity Systems being analyzed, there simply wasn’t as much incentive to look at the data in another way.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

As mentioned previously, findings came in two phases. Initially, I took what we learned from the Japan project and tried as far as possible to apply that to the goals of the project: to develop recommendations and tools for designers of training (and non-training) interventions at corporate headquarters, and to develop recommendations and tools for customizers in the affiliates. However, the manager of the global group and I ultimately decided that the data we had wasn't robust enough to support the conclusions we were drawing. We needed more evidence. At that point we made the decision to expand the circle and use Activity Theory to look at more SSMPs and at more interventions. As a result of the data collected in that later phase, I did indeed modify our conclusions.

This chapter will tell the story of our findings, and of how we progressed from our original conclusions to our later understandings. The reporting on the Initial Findings is more traditional and straightforward. It is a chronological account of what we did specifically in preparation for the training being done in Japan, and what we concluded as a result of that. Later in the chapter, I take a different orientation to illustrate our findings after we expanded the project; there I detail several Key Incidents which served to change my thinking about what was going on culturally with the work of the company, and I present the insights that these Key Incidents helped bring about. This is a less traditional reporting structure, but it is one which nonetheless preserves the spirit of my evolution in thinking.

### **Initial Findings**

Our first experience applying Activity Theory was with the Japan project. This was discussed earlier, but it would be worth reviewing it a bit now. At the time of the

Japan project, my goals regarding the use of Activity Theory in the company were inchoate. I felt that Activity Theory might illuminate some cultural issues, and I knew that if at all possible I wanted to use Activity Theory to somehow allow trainers to systematically approach cultural issues, but I did not know at the time exactly how I would do that or what the tools derived from Activity Theory would look like.

As mentioned earlier, we began by using Mwanza's questions to get a sense of the activity. We analyzed the project in a couple of different ways, from a variety of points of view. We finally made the SSMP itself the activity, so that (for example) we had both trainers and trainees in the Subject category. Indeed, with that approach most of the elements ended up being multi-faceted, but the object (the behavior of the Senior Sales Managers) and the outcome (various, but all boiling down to increased sales) were the same. Simultaneously, we sought to predict any contradictions in the way we were designing the SSMP with the way things were done in Japan. One contradiction which immediately became apparent was that between the Division of Labor of the global group, which required that certain people from the global group do the training, and one of the social rules of Japan, which says that younger people should not teach older people<sup>8</sup>. And while some of the trainers from the Japan affiliate were old enough, the trainers from the global group who were going to Japan to deliver the training were younger than the Senior Sales Managers who would be attending the program. The obvious ways of avoiding that conflict (find older trainers) was simply not available to us, so we addressed the problem by acknowledging it. At the beginning of the SSMP, we had an (older) high-ranking person from the Japan affiliate acknowledge that some of these people from

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<sup>8</sup> I don't want to leave readers with any misconceptions about Japan. In fact, this "rule" gets violated all the time. Still, it's salient enough that we thought it was worth addressing.

global were too young and that they hadn't worked in Japan, but that the content of the training had the approval and support of the senior leadership and the senior leadership expected full participation in the program.

After the Japan SSMP had ended, I took the data we had (feedback sheets from the conference plus my own notes and observations) and tried to formally fit the data to the triangular model of Activity Theory. Specifically, we were looking to be able to name the contradictions in terms of the elements of activity, and we were looking for certain commonalities that might suggest ways of systematically approaching cross-cultural training using Activity Theory. We decided that the contradiction discussed in the preceding paragraph was a Rules—Division of Labor contradiction. The social rules of Japan regarding who can teach whom were in conflict with the Division of Labor in the company which required certain people to do certain jobs. Other contradictions which we noted included the presence of multiple communities (Japan personnel vs. Global personnel; trainers vs. sales managers; executives vs. middle management) and some Division of Labor issues regarding who delivered what part of the training. We didn't see many issues with the Instruments, Object or Outcome of the SSMP. What evidence we had suggested that there was some fairly good alignment around the goals (outcome) of the program, nor were there any issues with the instruments used to affect the object and (hopefully) achieve the outcome. There was some action in the Subject element, especially regarding individual participants being perhaps in conflict with one of the many communities present. We worried, for example, that the presence of executive leadership might discourage engagement and discussion by the middle managers present. This worry was compounded by the fact that one bit of cultural knowledge that had

already been ingrained in the minds of the global group was that “discussions” in Japan are different. Specifically, you can’t just start a topic and expect people to jump in, you have to call on people and ask them what they think. So there was some conflict between the Subject element and the rules (perhaps in this case “assumptions” is more accurate) of the training, which anticipated a certain amount of discussion on the part of the participants. Still, while subjects were involved, we thought that this particular conflict was more usefully characterized as a Rule—Rule conflict between the “rules” of the training program (have discussion) vs. the social rules in Japan which discourage the kind of individual initiative required to get a discussion going. (Someone going first would seem to be showing off.)

We addressed this particular conflict by having the trainers take a larger role in facilitating the discussion. Again, this was something they had already encountered in Japan and already had strategies for addressing. The contribution of Activity Theory was to name the conflict and make it concrete.

One of the commonalities I noticed at the time was that much of the action seemed to be along the bottom of the Activity Theory triangle. Most of the issues we spent time dealing with (either pro-actively or on-the-fly) seemed related to the three elements along the bottom of the triangle, specifically the Rules, the Community, and the Division of Labor. (Or, using the wording of the company, the Rules, the Stakeholder Groups, and the Roles and Responsibilities.) Therefore, when putting together the tools based on Activity Theory that I had promised the company, I began with those elements.

Our goals were tools and strategies for designers at corporate headquarters, and tools for customizers in the affiliates. The group was more interested in the latter, so I

began with that. I developed three tools: a report for customizers with recommendations for how to approach customization, a job-aid summarizing the report, and a job aid for the global group summarizing recommendations about how to approach affiliates with regard to helping them implement training developed at company headquarters in the US.

These were all right as far as they went, but when discussing the tools with the manager of the global group, she was skeptical. Although we had evidence to back up what we were saying, the recommendations didn't feel right to her. Given that she had more experience here<sup>9</sup>, her resistance was a major red flag. In discussing things, we finally decided that our evidence base was too thin. Once we said it, it was obvious. Of course our evidence base was too thin. One project in one country wasn't enough to begin to make recommendations to customizers dealing with many projects in many countries. The next step, then, was to expand our circle of inquiry and find more data from more projects from more parts of the world.

In preparation for doing that, we held a large meeting with all the members of the global group. This was a particularly opportune time to do so, as not only were we moving to a new phase with Activity Theory, but there were some personnel changes in the department as well. This was a time to get everyone up to speed and on the same page, as well as to begin to move in a new direction. At this meeting, we also agreed upon the specific objective of the project. Our wording was this: To increase sales by using the principles of Activity Theory to obtain a deep understanding of cultural variables in order to produce superior training and achieve superior implementation. Although it had been in the background before, this was the first time that the word "implementation" had surfaced as one of the objectives of the research. This shows some of the evolution of our

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<sup>9</sup> And yes, given that she was the boss; but really, that was tertiary.

thinking; not only were we concerned with designing, developing, and delivering good training, we wanted to go beyond that and make sure that what we designed, developed, and delivered was actually used as well.

In deciding where we could focus to get new data, we decided that the best approach would be to concentrate on the SSMPs. They were run throughout the world on an annual basis, so the company had lots of experience and data surrounding them. In addition, the content was highly similar, with only moderate local variation due to customization. The members of the global group seemed confident that looking systematically at the SSMPs would give us much better data which would lead to stronger conclusions.

In addition to this, although it was not formally decided at the meeting, I began to collect what I later called “little incidents”. These were anecdotes that came up, often while discussing something else, which seemed to me to have cultural implications. Although I didn’t set out to purposely collect these, and although for a long time they sat in my notebook with me not sure what to do with them, they turned out to contribute some key data that helped shape my thinking.

The formal data collection proceeded relatively smoothly, and resulted in a new tool for the company. We needed some way to collect the data about the SSMPs systematically, and we wanted the framework to be one based on Activity Theory. To that end, I developed a debriefing tool, based on Mwanza’s Eight-Step Model, which I expanded by adding space for noting contradictions or problems identified, potential solutions, an implementation plan for those solutions, follow-up and evaluation of effectiveness, and lessons learned (see Appendix 1). I used the tool to structure

interviews about past SSMPs, and we also used the tool to debrief SSMPs that had just occurred. Having this tool was also part of achieving the “superior implementation” mentioned above.

The tool was, for the most part, well-received by the individuals with whom I used it. On one of my days with the company, I was scheduled to meet for an hour with one person, then for an hour with a different person to debrief two different SSMPs. We began the first meeting with the Eight-Step questions. This was fairly routine, with the person I was working with mostly listing the items that fell into the different categories (Subjects: the training team, the area Marketing Director, the area Director, etc.<sup>10</sup> Tools: The Needs Assessment, the program, pins and posters, etc.) The energy level of the discussion was low to normal; we were simply identifying items and writing them down. The energy level picked up noticeably, however, as we moved on to identify contradictions. The team member became more animated; her words began to flow more quickly, and her lines of discourse began to stream. She would preface a statement with comments like, “Hey, and you know what else?” or “And that reminds me!”<sup>11</sup> The meeting actually went longer than an hour, so in the meantime the second person I was supposed to meet showed up. In the end, the first person decided that she wanted to stay another hour for the second meeting, where much the same pattern occurred. We spent some time listing elements, and the conversation got more excited as we began to talk about contradictions. This meeting too went late, but both team members ended our time

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<sup>10</sup> The team member actually identified these people by name, but in the interest of privacy I’ll use their titles.

<sup>11</sup> Honesty requires me to admit that those may not be exact quotes. I didn’t tape the meeting. I do remember it well, however. At the height of the meeting she was throwing out one observation after another, and it was all I could do to keep up with her as I took notes.

together expressing satisfaction with what we had done and the value of the insights they had come to.

Admittedly, not all sessions were like that, but after several such sessions and days spent talking to people about their cross-cultural experiences in the company, I built up a library of incidents and observations that served to change my thinking about what Activity Theory was telling us about the role of culture in the company. The next section will detail these incidents and what we learned from them.

### **Key Incidents**

The typical way to present the data from a descriptive case study is with thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Stake, 1995) and narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), painting the picture of the individuals involved and their actions as they discharge their daily duties. However, all data selection and reporting involves choices. Not everything can (or should) be told. In this case, both because of the practical, business-results orientation of the work, and because of the focused nature of the case, I have instead chosen to let these key incidents speak for the case, a less orthodox approach which requires some explanation. My goal is to present something self-contained enough to give the reader a sense of understanding both of the problem and of why we reacted to it/made sense of it in the way that we did, but not so complete as to overwhelm the reader by trying to (re)create the entire narrative of the work. As Clandinin & Connelly (2000) say, "...life—as we come to it and as it comes to others—is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (p.17). The incidents I present below are in

the spirit of these “narrative fragments”; they are not the whole story, but taken together they illustrate the story of how we came to new understandings about the work of the global group, and of how Activity Theory could contribute to that work, by contextualizing and describing the comments made and problems we encountered. This more focused reporting of the data is also consistent with the values of efficiency and efficacy that drove the work of the company; there are no thick descriptions in business, instead, there is a relentless focus on having just enough of the right information. More than that is a waste of resources.

Where did these key incidents come from? When interviewing people and when discussing various SSMPs, we tried to concentrate on finding the cultural angle to problems or successes that stood out for us. Often, talk would turn to other happenings or incidents which came to the minds of the team members as they discussed whatever they were discussing. Several of these seemed to me to have cultural implications, though I wasn't sure at the time I collected them exactly what I was going to do with them. As I reflected on the data, I noticed that there seemed to be two types of incidents that people found salient. Times when culture did act as a barrier to understanding and to implementation, and times when it didn't, though it might have been expected to. The former type of situation was more common than the latter. The rest of this section will discuss some of the key incidents that fell into these two categories.

#### *Culture makes a difference—Japan and “Coaching”*

One of the first anecdotes I heard as I began working with the company on the Japan project was the story of Japan and “Coaching”. This story came up on a couple of different occasions in the context of talking about differences between Japan and the US,

and some of the challenges regarding Japan that the company had faced in the past. As the company sought to increase the consistency of its processes in its affiliates around the world, it moved to increase the amount of coaching done by managers to their sales representatives. When it came to Japan, the company had much internally collected corporate data to suggest that the Japan affiliate wasn't coaching, so the corporate center in the US began to try and sell them on the idea. Japan's response was to agree that coaching was important, and to point out that they were already doing it. This not being the expected answer, the company returned to their data, asked some more questions, and once again came to the conclusion that managers in Japan weren't coaching their sales representatives. Japan's response was to again insist that managers were indeed coaching.

The problem lay in what was meant by the word "coaching". In the minds of the corporate group, coaching meant going out with the sales representatives and observing them in action—watching them as they spoke with their clients, noting what strengths and weaknesses they had in their delivery, noting how well they implemented the company selling process—and then debriefing with them later about what they did well and how they could improve. The manager would typically spend all day with the representative, and would see them in a variety of situations with a variety of clients. In Japan, when managers went out on calls with sales representatives, it was typically not for a full day, but rather for calls on one or two specific clients. In addition, when the manager went out on a call, it was typically the manager who did the selling, while the representative watched and observed. To corporate headquarters, who were trying to implement coaching around the world, this was not coaching. To the Japanese, this *was* coaching.

The key is in the difference in how Japan culturally and historically has approached the question of how you grow the next generation. For many in the west, growing the next generation means giving them the chance to do, to act, to have the experience. In Japan, the expectation is that the next generation will watch and learn. This is in part related to the more hierarchical nature of Japanese society. People who are older are expected to be more knowledgeable and have more skills. It would be impudent, if not rude, for a younger person to outperform an older person, especially if that person were a superior.

There is also the consideration that in Japan—again, largely due to the hierarchical nature of the society—people expect to deal with people of roughly their own level. For example, a doctor in Japan taking a sales call from a pharmaceutical company would probably *expect* to hear the sales pitch from the most senior person in the room, and might be put off if he had to deal directly with the lower ranked sales representative.<sup>12</sup>

All of this combined to give the idea of “coaching” a different flavor in Japan. The meaning there is closer to “demonstrating”. Masters will tell apprentices to “learn by watching my back”. And it is typically some time before an apprentice will be entrusted with any part of a task. Indeed, conversation with the individual from the Japanese affiliate lent some specific data to this point. Recall his observation, mentioned earlier, that “America is explain and understand. Japan is imply and perceive”. This observation has much explanatory power when applied to the issue of coaching in Japan—there the

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<sup>12</sup> Again, I’ve no wish to leave readers with any misconceptions about Japan. Certainly there are social egalitarians in Japan who are less concerned about rank. However, there are more traditional individuals as well. It would not be prudent for a company to ignore this.

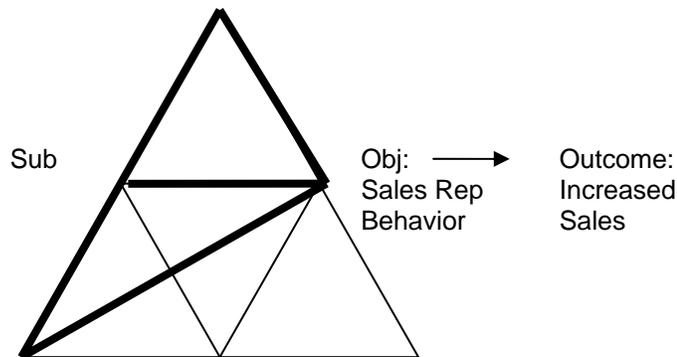
sales representatives were expected to watch the senior person, and imply and perceive what it was they were supposed to do.

By the time I heard this story, the problem itself was on its way to being resolved. There had been some individuals from the Japan affiliate working with the training dept. at corporate headquarters, and they helped sell the western style “coaching” to managers in Japan. I personally was able to provide more cultural explanation about why Japan approached coaching differently, which helped increase understanding on the part of the Americans in the group that I worked with. Currently, Japan seems to be using something of a hybrid coaching model. Managers will spend all day with a representative, and will typically let the representative take the lead during the sales call. At times, however, the manager may take the lead if they feel the situation calls for it. Either way, at the end of the day they debrief, and the representative is given suggestions about where and how they can improve their selling performance.

What would Activity Theory say about this? The diagram below shows the action. There seem to be a couple of different contradictions going on simultaneously. The internally collected data<sup>13</sup> the company had focused on the behaviors of the managers and the sales representatives. The fact that the behaviors the company saw were not consistent with the behaviors they were hoping to see suggests that there was some inconsistency in the Rules element of the Activity System. Specifically, the cultural-historical rules of Japanese society are in conflict here with corporate expectations about how managers should interact with their people. In addition, given what I already knew of Japan and how expertise is grown there, plus the “imply and perceive” methodology mentioned by the Japanese individual, there also seems to be contradiction in the Tools element;

**Japan and “Coaching”—Level 1 Contradictions and Triangular Interactions**

Tools:  
Coaching by Observing vs.  
Coaching by Demonstrating



Rules:  
Cultural rules of hierarchy vs.  
Corporate expectations for behavior

<sup>13</sup> I never actually saw this data, but it was summarized for me by the manager and others.

specifically, in the procedures used by the Japanese managers to affect sales representative behavior. The contradiction here is between coaching by observing and critiquing, or coaching by demonstrating.

The important thing to note here is that the two bold triangles (Sub—Tools—Obj and Sub—Rules—Obj) can both be functional in different ways. Take the top triangle, for example. There is expertise in Japan; people can learn by observing, implying and perceiving. The Japanese manifestation of that particular triangle is functional. The object (sales representative behavior), does change, with the result that the outcome (increased sales) is accrued. Of course, there is expertise in America too. The observe and critique method also results in changes to sales representative behavior that result in increased sales. In like manner, the bottom triangle is also functional either way. In both cases, the rules that govern the sales representative behavior can and do achieve the desired outcome. However, the business needs of the company required making judgments about whether or not one method is better than another. And while there was a sense in the department that it would be counter-productive to simply insist on doing things in a certain way (in the parlance of Human Performance Technology, they wanted commitment, not compliance), there was also a sense that it was necessary to make those business judgments, even if that seemed to imply that they were making value judgments about the culture.

We did not at the time we discussed the Japan and “Coaching” issue engage in any dialogue about how a company could make such business judgments in a culturally sensitive way, nor did we discuss how we could frame these issues to get the desired “commitment, not compliance”. This was mostly because my own thinking and my own

sense of how Activity Theory could be applied to the situation were too inchoate for me to realize at the time the implications of the triangles. I do have the sense from the interactions I had with the people in the company that we could have had a rich and engaging dialogue about how to make those business decisions in a culturally sensitive way, and I'm quite confident that they did everything they could to make those judgments in a culturally sensitive way; however, I have little in my collected data that does anything more than hint at the approach they actually took.

Having said that, I suspect that the approach they took was to frame the judgment in terms of certain business parameters. Whether or not one method is better than another depends on what parameters you consider important. To take a somewhat underhanded stab at an educational video I once saw, I nearly fell off my chair in horror when I saw an elementary school teacher encourage the children to use several different methods for adding a column of numbers together, then at the end of the lesson she asked them, "Is one method better than another?" and all the good little children chimed in unison, "No!" That can't possibly be right. Some methods are faster, some are more accurate; some children will find some methods more intuitive than others. Whether or not one method is better than another depends on your parameters. In the case of coaching, the desired outcome would arguably be achieved more quickly with the more direct intervention of observe and critique. Even in Japanese society, there is acknowledgment that the imply and perceive model takes a lot of time. Which is not to say that the model is without virtue—certainly there are advantages to the deep, personal learning that results from doing things that way. However, in a competitive business environment, you can't wait for someone to (hopefully) imply and perceive how they can improve their performance.

Better (i.e., faster) for the person with expertise to watch what the target individual is doing, then making suggestions about how they could improve. By making explicit the Level 1 contradictions, and by opening up for dialogue the functional nature of *both* of the triangles, Activity Theory provides a good framework on which to base a discussion of parameters with an eye to making value judgments in a way that maintains cultural respect.

*Culture makes a difference—China and “Relationship Selling”*

Another issue that came up in conversations with members of the global group was a particularly sticky problem from another part of North Asia. This time it was China. Once again, the company was seeking to streamline its processes worldwide and achieve some consistency across the various affiliates. To this end, they were rolling out around the world a common selling process. When it got to China, the Chinese management all said, “This is very nice, but it won’t work here. In China, it’s all about relationship selling.” Certainly building relationships is important, corporate agreed, but using this selling process will help you build those relationships. Nope, said China, it won’t work here.

And there the situation sat for several months. No one at corporate wanted to *force* the change through (as mentioned earlier, they wanted commitment, not compliance). So they kept coming back to the issue from several angles, trying to get China to see the value of the selling process, emphasizing how other affiliates had found it to be valuable, offering to help roll the process out, and whatever else they could think of. China continued to insist that although yes it had some value and it was very nice as

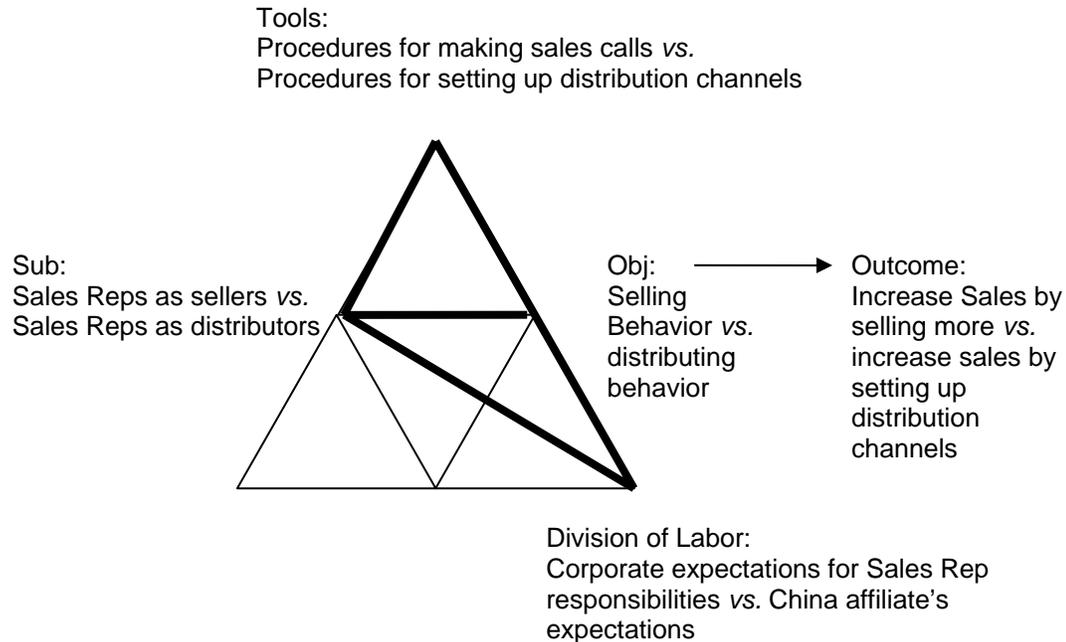
far as it went, the new selling process wasn't right for them. The response they gave over and over was that things are different here; this won't work for us.

It took a long time and a lot of relationship building on the part of the global team to finally figure out what questions to ask to whom to get to the heart of the matter. It turns out that in China, sales representatives aren't merely responsible for selling the company's products, they also have to set up the distribution channel. Setting up the distribution channel is called "building relationships". The sales representatives in China call what they do "relationship selling". From their point of view, the selling process that corporate wanted them to implement was incomplete; it wasn't sufficient for them to do their jobs, as their jobs had responsibilities that were completely unaddressed by the new selling process.

Once everyone realized what was going on, things progressed more smoothly. In the end, China did implement the new process, though they gave it their own name. It became one part of the Chinese selling process, which was all about "relationship selling".

Again, the diagram below shows the action. In this case, there is Level 1 contradiction all over the place. Beginning in the Subject category, the sales representatives in China have something of a dual role. They must both sell product in a traditional way, and also set up the distribution channel. This Level 1 contradiction repeats itself throughout the upper triangle, as sales representatives have different tools (i.e., procedures) for doing those things, and the object of their activity changes depending on whether they are acting in their selling capacity or distributing capacity. Interestingly, there is some unity in the Outcome category, even though that too shows some contradiction. The ultimate desired outcome is the same—to increase sales.

## China and “Relationship Selling”—Level 1 Contradictions and Triangular Interactions



However, in China the sales representatives are responsible for bringing that outcome about in two different ways. They must not only do so by selling more product, they must also do so by setting up the distribution channel in the first place. Although they both could be considered Level 1 contradictions, this feels different from the contradiction seen in the Division of Labor element. There the contradiction is more fundamental; those expectations were at odds with each other, and there was no final unity in the category itself. All of which suggests that there might be different sorts of Level 1 contradiction. These could be characterized as potential contradiction through parallel processes vs. absolute contradiction through conflicting processes. The former would not necessarily result in a dysfunctional contradiction, but the potential would be there and participants in the system would do well to know that. The latter, however, would be

more like a traditional contradiction; there will be repercussions from such a contradiction.

In this case, the whole upper triangle represents two different paths centered on two different responsibilities. There is a duality there, which implies a contradiction, but there's not *necessarily* a conflict (the obvious one about not having enough time in the day to do everything aside). In the lower triangle, however, specifically in the Division of Labor element, there *is* a conflict. The expectations of corporate and the affiliate are different, and until that difference was understood, the issue of China and "Relationship Selling" went unresolved.

Although understanding the contradiction in the Division of Labor element seems to have been the key to understanding what the problem was (as soon as corporate realized that sales representatives in China had that extra responsibility, they were able to reposition the new selling process as *one part* of China's selling process, and China was able to accept it as *one part*), it is also probably the case that the fact that the contradictions were so evenly spread throughout the Activity System made it difficult to pinpoint the problem. From China's point of view, the new selling process was clearly incomplete in many ways (i.e., at many points of the triangle). That may have made it more difficult for people in China to frame their objections in more specific terms.

It also suggests that China might not have seen the work that sales representatives do as having parallel components, as my depiction of the upper triangle implies. If sales representatives and their managers in China saw their work more holistically, then it would have been even more difficult to pull apart the different responsibilities and describe their work in a way that let corporate realize what was going on. The final unity

in the outcome category suggests how that holistic view might be conceived—sales representatives are responsible for increasing sales. All that they do leads to that outcome and is driven and motivated by that outcome.

I admit that much of this is speculation. This incident was older than the Japan and coaching problem, and by the time I heard of it it was considered a closed case. The “new” selling process was well ingrained in all the affiliates, and had become part of the company way of doing things worldwide. As such, there was no opportunity to test any of these hypotheses with anyone from the China affiliate. It is an interesting thought experiment in how Activity Theory can be applied, however, and it is one that has relevance for a different incident discussed later.

#### *Culture makes a difference—Europe and Conceptual Learning*

Before discussing that incident, however, another one where culture made a difference; unlike the previous two incidents, this one was captured soon after it happened, and it was done using the debriefing tool based on Activity Theory discussed above. The SSMP in this instance was held for the European region; the manager of the global group and one other trainer went as trainers from corporate, while others from some of the European affiliates also delivered part of the training. It was the manager of the global group, however, who was ultimately “in charge” of the SSMP, though she shared responsibility with management from the European affiliates.

The program for this SSMP had gone well in the other regions where it had been run, but in Europe the reaction was far more negative from the very beginning. Even before formal feedback was collected at the end of the first day, informal feedback (comments during breaks, etc.) was largely negative. The participants mostly seemed to

object to the highly conceptual nature of the training. In recounting the situation, the manager of the global group characterized their objections thus: Make it practical or you're just wasting our time!

Not wanting to ignore any feedback, especially feedback as strong as they were getting, the trainers met the night of the first day and re-worked the entire program. They kept most of the content itself, concentrating especially on what they thought were the key goals of the conference, but re-worked the delivery method and the instructional strategies. The heart of the new approach was to divide the participants into cross-country teams to work on actual problems and develop actual solutions. The learning points were all to be the same, but under the new format the participants were to bring in examples and issues from their own affiliates and share them with their groups.

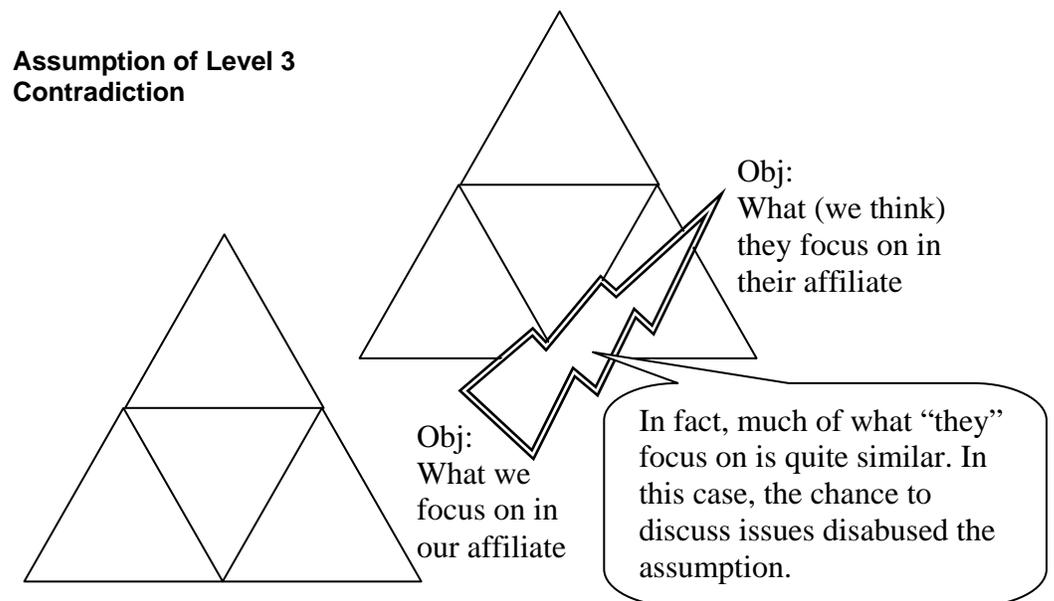
The new format was well-received, but interestingly much of the (now positive) feedback dwelt not on how much more practical the new format was, but rather on how being in these cross-country teams helped them to see how their problems weren't unique after all. Many of the participants were surprised to find that people in other countries were struggling with very similar issues, and knowing this not only helped them to feel better about the challenges they were facing (hey, we're not alone after all), but also held out hope for finding solutions which would work for them (well, if this worked for the Germans maybe it will work for us).

As we discussed the European SSMP, the trainers were strongly aware that something cultural was going on. It wasn't simply that the Europeans rejected the conceptual approach of the original format, while other regions simply accepted it; it was also the learning and the finding of common ground that occurred in the cross-country

teams. There seems to have been something of an assumption on the part of many of the participants that the issues they were facing were unique to their affiliates, and while in some cases that was true, far more often they were finding that other affiliates were struggling with similar issues as well.

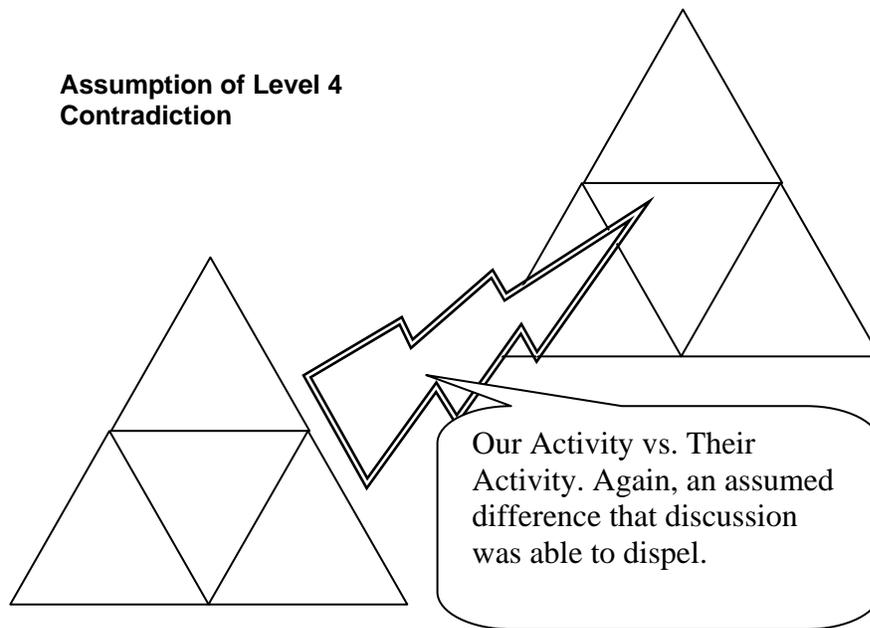
We did not, at the debriefing meeting, discuss where the contradictions were and what Activity Theory would say about the issues raised. This was due to time constraints. The understanding was that I would take the data and analyze it on my own using Activity Theory. What would Activity Theory say about the European SSMP? It might be tempting to conclude that there is something about the status of the European region in the company that allowed it to be assertive where other SSMPs weren't, or that there is something about Europe culturally that values practical, hands-on experience over conceptual learning. However, I didn't think that we had enough data to make either of those claims. Instead, I focused on the reactions of the individuals to working in cross-country teams. This doesn't fall easily into any of the individual elements of activity. Nor does it seem to be any sort of contradiction *between* the elements. Whatever's going on here seems to be going on at a higher level, either 3 or 4. It is as though the participants brought with them an assumption of uniqueness, an assumption of difference. In terms of Activity Theory, this may be an assumption of Level 3 or 4 contradiction. They may have assumed that while much of their activities were the same, the object was somehow different (assumption of level 3 contradiction), or that their activity systems were in and of themselves somehow different (assumption of Level 4 contradiction). When brought into contact with each other, that assumption was disabused, and the participants were able (indeed, anxious) to learn from each other.

The implications of such an assumption should be clear. If people assume that their activities are in some way fundamentally different from those of their peers, they will neither seek advice from their peers, nor strive to volunteer advice. Such an atmosphere is not conducive to sharing best practices, or for units helping one another to reach higher levels of performance. Given how important it is in the business world to continually adjust and raise the performance bar, an assumption of difference can be a major barrier. As such, it may be slightly inaccurate to have put this incident in with the “culture makes a difference” incidents. What made the difference, to be accurate, was an *assumption* that culture makes a difference.



Earlier in this dissertation, I identified the idea of contradiction, or disruption, as one of the key ideas that Activity Theory brings to the table. The European SSMP intriguingly suggests that Activity Theory might not just have a role in helping to identify contradictions that do exist, but might also be able to explain a lack of interaction when

contradictions *don't* exist, but people assume that they do. In the case of the European SSMP, simply bringing the individuals together and having them work on common problems was enough to overcome the assumptions of difference. There may be other ways of doing that.



*Culture doesn't make a difference—The Fire Alarm*

This incident was the one I struggled with for the longest time. In truth, I'm still not completely sure what I think it means. At the same time, I do feel that it has a relevant cultural message. This was another anecdote that came up in conversation. It was told lightheartedly and with much laughter. It seems that in the middle of the night before the beginning of a big international conference, the fire alarm went off in the hotel where everyone was staying. The manager of the global group, who was telling the story, apparently sleeps in sweats. "So I was OK." she said. One of the managers from Australia, in contrast, apparently sleeps in boxer shorts. Just boxer shorts. And as they had met earlier in the day, when he saw her outside the building, he came over to talk. So there

she was, trying to act casual while keeping her eyes focused on his neck up<sup>14</sup>, while he didn't seem to be bothered in the least by what he was (or wasn't) wearing.

All about milled people from the company in various stages of sleepwear. One of the people from Spain was wearing silk pajamas. He immediately became “Don Juan” for the rest of the conference. People were talking, laughing, joking...

The conference went more smoothly than any other conference our manager had ever attended. People were relaxed, they interacted well, the atmosphere was pleasant and congenial while being focused and productive. The manager telling me this story felt that the fire alarm probably had a lot to do with that, though she did admit that it probably wouldn't do to add “Pull the fire alarm the night before a conference” to the instructional designer's toolkit.

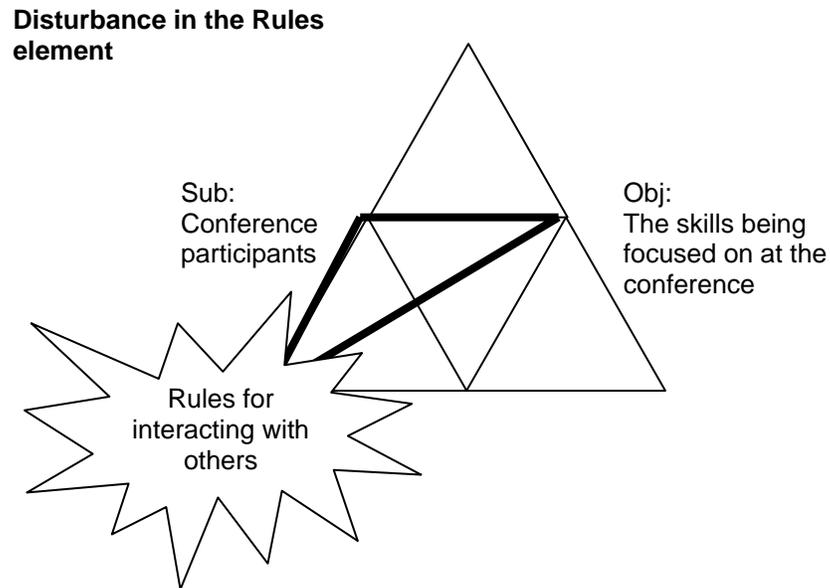
What can Activity Theory tell us about this incident? Clearly, something popped in the Rules element. Normal rules about decorum and appropriate dress were overrun by rules for behavior in emergencies; specifically, fire alarms at hotels. As a result, the normally staid Sub—Rules—Obj triangle became unstable. The rules for normal behavior having already been pushed aside, people were able to interact and establish relationships in a new and different ways. The fact that everyone had already seen each other in their sleepwear changed the dynamic. Normally, you don't see someone in their sleepwear until you've reached a relatively advanced stage of intimacy with the person. Now that they'd done that, it made the process of meeting, getting to know each other, and interacting with each other smoother.

In other words, as noted earlier, rules both constrain and justify action. Rules are necessary for social interaction to occur smoothly, but the greater smoothness that

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<sup>14</sup> And she's not a tall woman. Only slightly over 5 feet.

occurred after the rules element popped is evidence that rules also serve to maintain a certain distance between subjects, and actually prevent interactions from working at a level of closeness that would otherwise be possible.



The manager's (rightful) rejection of pulling the alarm on purpose nonetheless raises an interesting question. Without resorting to illegal tactics, is it possible to create situations where you can slice through rules and achieve that greater closeness and greater productivity? The next incident suggests that it is indeed possible to do that, and furthermore suggests how and under what circumstances such slicing can be done.

*Culture doesn't make a difference—China and the High Five Activity*

Back to China, and another anecdote that was told with much laughter. At a training conference in China, the manager felt that the energy level was a bit low. So at the end of one of the sections, she added an energy-pumping activity that involved the

participants high-fiving each other. I do not know the exact content of the activity, but my understanding is that it was designed to get participants to explicitly acknowledge accomplishments of others by high-fiving them. So, at her urging, everyone (from junior members to managers) ended up milling around the room explaining their accomplishments and exchanging high-fives. The activity went well, and in the feedback, one of the participants listed the high-five activity as being the activity they liked the most. Later, after the conference was long finished, a Chinese person who didn't know what had happened at the conference saw the high-five activity, and commented that it was nice and all, but it would never work in China. The people telling the story then laughingly re-enacted the activity, now ironic in light of the information that it would "never work in China". However, the conversation that followed the telling of the anecdote didn't come to any specific conclusions. No one really knew what it was that had allowed them to do this thing that they theoretically couldn't. There was no sense that in the future, they would question a cultural expert who told them that a particular exercise wouldn't work in a particular country. They might decide to push back if they felt an important change management issue was at stake, but they would do so on business grounds, not cultural ones. Indeed, as their frequent questions to me and to the Japanese individual about Japan showed, they continued to accept what they considered to be authoritative word about a country or culture.

This of course is not dysfunctional, and it is not a criticism that they continued to do so. Relying on expert experience is a good alternative when you don't have expertise yourself. As I struggled with this incident, though, I found myself adding disclaimers to the things I said about Japan. "Of course, not everyone in Japan is like that," or "Well,

there are exceptions to this, but...” I didn’t know at first what to make of the incident, but as with the others, I felt that something important was going on.

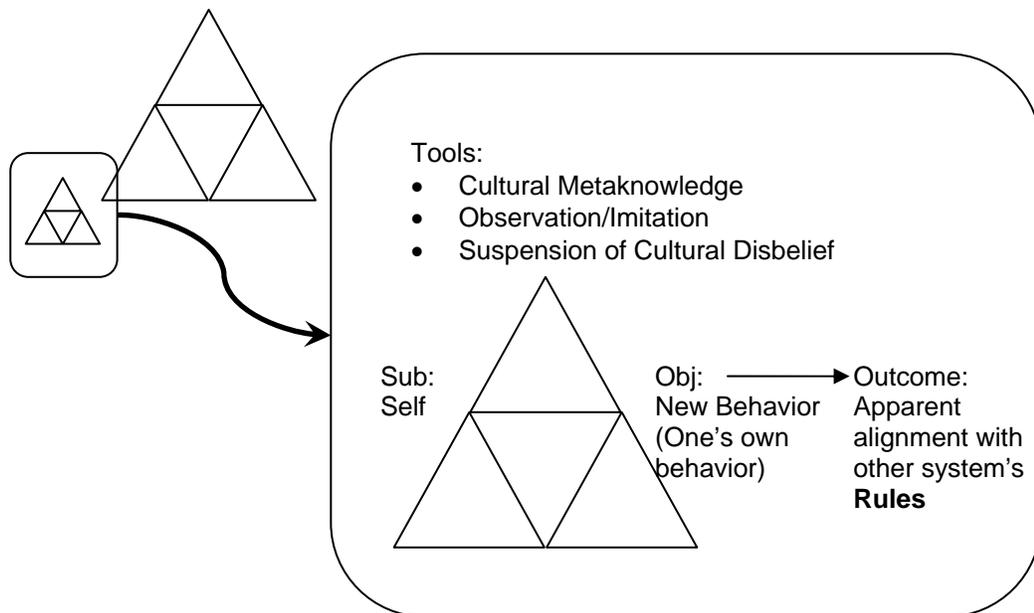
Part of the problem in analyzing this incident lay in what I didn’t know. To the manager telling the story, the heart of the incident was in the fact that the High-Five activity wasn’t supposed to have been successful, yet it was. Therefore, when telling the story, she didn’t elaborate on what exactly the activity had the participants doing, nor did she specifically mention on what grounds the Chinese person who later dismissed the activity did so. Because I had no sense at the time that this was an important incident, I did not ask at the time for further detail.

Regardless, using Activity Theory as a lens for analyzing the anecdote, some things seem clear. For example, it’s clear that whatever is going on is going on in the rules element. It’s also clear that there was a potential contradiction there that didn’t happen. Had the activity not worked, as the Chinese person anticipated, the contradiction could have been characterized in a couple of different ways; as being between the Rules of Chinese society and the rules of the conference (to participate in the activities), or as being between the activity system of Chinese society and the activity system of the western society whence the activity came—a level 4 contradiction made manifest in the high-five activity itself.

And yet, there was no contradiction. After some reflection and conversation with colleagues and advisors, I think that what happened was that an alternate Activity System kicked in—one which is not often overtly acknowledged—and that is the activity of stepping outside of your activity system. Some people fervently resist doing this; others seem to take delight in it. Most people find that it can be invigorating or at least

enlightening to step outside of their cultural norms, as long as the stepping out is done under controlled conditions marked by clear boundaries. In the case of the high five activity in China, it was just one activity which was a small part of one training conference. It wasn't something which required the participants to restructure their lives in any fundamental way. Note the contrast with the problem of "Relationship Selling" in China. In that case, there was at least potential contradiction in 5 of the 7 Elements of Activity, and absolute contradiction in one of them (the Division of Labor). Here, the unmanifested contradiction seems more localized. In both cases, the global group tried something which "wouldn't work" in China; but in one case, China pushed back, while in the other, China accepted the cultural oddity.

**Activity of Stepping Outside of your Activity System**



All of this implies that the rules element is deep and rich in intriguing ways. There are rules for breaking rules, and whole Activity Systems that can make that happen. Instructional designers may want to keep this in mind. This incident doesn't mean that you can always get away with pushing the cultural envelope, but it is certainly evidence that you sometimes can. The key seems to be in clearly marking the boundaries of the cultural expansion, and making sure that what is being asked of the participants is relatively limited in scope. Having a good sense of the learners is especially important when intentionally pushing the envelope, as some people are more open to such adventures than others. Some of the tools listed in the triangle above would be important in making that determination. Do they have sufficient Cultural Metaknowledge? Do they seem willing to observe and imitate? Can they suspend their cultural disbelief, or are they so integrated into their own way of doing things that any different way is going to seem alien to them and make them uncomfortable? No doubt there would be other questions (Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe, & MacDonald, 2000). In the case of China, it is probably significant that all of the individuals at the conference knowingly made the decision at some point in their lives to work for a foreign company; they probably had some sense that at some point things were going to be a little different. They may have even hoped for that. All of these factors combined to make the high-five activity successful, even though it shouldn't have been.

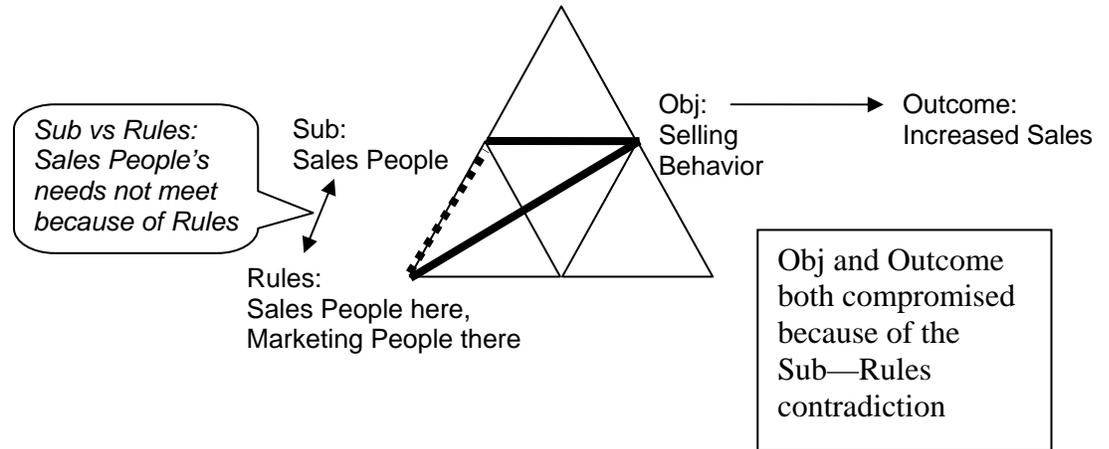
This incident also provides an example of where Frame Analysis might usefully be invoked. Goffman speaks of activity as being "...a model upon which to work transformations for fun, deception, experiment, rehearsal, dream, fantasy, ritual, demonstration, analysis, and charity" (p. 560). Acknowledging that Goffman is using the

word “activity” in a different (though not wholly incompatible) manner than Engeström, it is nonetheless apparent how an actor from one culture might “reframe” their experience so as to temporarily align themselves with another culture. Their reframing might have been for fun, for deception, or for some other reason, but the reframing itself would be available to the actor as a potential action.

*One more incident—the Latin America SSMP*

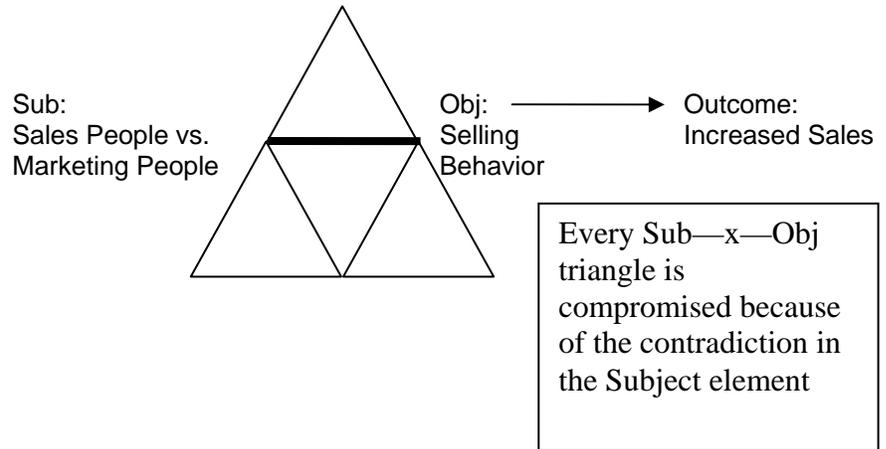
In addition to the insights raised by these incidents, one other important finding was that how a contradiction is characterized can make a difference in what solutions suggest themselves. I am indebted to several sharp-minded students from one of my classes for making me realize this. I was sharing with the class some of my preliminary data as a way of illustrating the concept of contradiction in Activity Theory. Specifically, I was sharing with them one of the observations I had gotten from debriefing the Latin America SSMP with one of the trainers from the global group. The Latin America SSMP was run concurrently with a program for marketing, with some joint sessions (introduction, wrap-up), but with most of the sessions being specific to each group. The problem was that the sales people wanted to be part of the larger marketing group. They had a stake in the decisions made there, but because of the way the conference was set up, they were unable to interact much with marketing. We characterized this as a Level 2 Subject—Rules contradiction. The needs and desires of the Subjects (the sales people) couldn’t be met because of the Rules (the way the conference was set up).

### Original Characterization: Level 2 Sub—Rule Contradiction



Our potential solution was to re-write the agenda. Next year, we would put more joint sessions on the schedule, and make sure sales and marketing had more time together. A wonderful application of Activity Theory; we had identified a contradiction and put together a solution. The students, however, didn't buy it. They pointed out that this could also be characterized as a Level 1 Subject—Subject contradiction between the sales people and the marketing people. The students suspected that the sales people feeling marginalized might be symptomatic of something deeper within the company which valued marketing over sales. If that were true, then simply changing the rules so that the two groups were together more wouldn't solve the underlying problem. One of the students in particular, basing his objection on his experience in the military, was adamant that changing rules almost never solves anything. People will go through the motions, but the underlying problem will always remain.

### Student Re-Characterization: Level 1 Sub—Sub Contradiction



It was a good objection, and it was great to get push-back from my students like that. Initially, I tried to defend the position that the trainer and I had taken, but in the end the students convinced me; I think the trainer and I missed an opportunity to use Activity Theory to explore some of the dynamics of the company more deeply. At the very least, the incident shows that how a contradiction is characterized is important. Characterizing a contradiction one way (as a Subject—Rule contradiction, for example) suggests particular sorts of solutions (change the rules), but characterizing it another way would suggest different solutions. When using Activity Theory as a lens, it's important not simply to name a contradiction and have done with it, it's also important to consider whether the contradiction could be characterized in a different way, and if so, what the implications for solutions of the different way would be.

The data discussed above was not the sum total of all the data I had collected. There were other incidents and notes from more SSMPs. What is presented here are the incidents which seemed the most salient, or were in some ways typical of other incidents

and anecdotes that I collected. They are the “narrative fragments” that stand for the case. They not only served to change my thinking about the case itself, but also to deepen my understanding and sense of Activity Theory, both theoretically and as a practical tool. For looking back over all the data that I collected since we decided to expand the project after the Japan SSMP, I did indeed come to slightly different conclusions, which I felt were more robust.

### **New Conclusions**

After analyzing the new data from the SSMPs and reflecting on the incidents and anecdotes I collected, I concluded that I had been slightly wrong about where in an activity triangle one was most likely to find cultural concerns. Initially, I had identified the bottom of the activity triangle as a place where cultural issues were likely to manifest themselves—in the Rules, Community, and Division of Labor. Yet very little in the new data centered on Community, and none of the triangles from any of the key incidents involved the Community element. Of course, Community is an important part of human activity; that element is the heart of the social context of any activity. But few of the culturally significant incidents were salient at the Community point of the triangle. Instead, most of the action was in the Rules, Division of Labor, and *Tools* elements.

This new sense of where in the triangle one should look for cultural concerns made sense for the company, as it was well aligned with the company’s ethnocentric approach to strategy and its geocentric approach to implementation, discussed earlier. Strategically, goals were set at the corporate level; this is equivalent to determining Object and (especially) Outcome. In the affiliates, there seemed to be widespread

agreement on this. It was very rare that there was any disagreement on what the Object and Outcome of an SSMP (or any other training intervention that we discussed) should be. And the company worked hard to sell Objects and Outcomes to the affiliates and make sure they were “on board” with them. Again, in the parlance of Human Performance Technology, they sought commitment, not compliance. Tactically, the attainment of those goals was left to the affiliates; this is equivalent to the Tools, Rules, and Division of Labor of an activity triangle. The other elements, Subject and Community, were in some sense givens. The Division of Labor might determine who specifically was a sales trainer or a marketing executive, but in terms of Subject categories that didn’t much matter. In like manner, the many overlapping Communities of the company were there and interacting regardless of how specifically the company was working to achieve its goals.

Of course, none of this is meant to imply that Tools, Rules, and Division of Labor are the only activity elements that the company needs to be concerned about. Nor is it meant to imply that culture can somehow be “located” at the points of the triangle (though that is a tempting and probably functional shorthand). Culture permeates any and every activity system; it can become salient at any point. Subject and Community must be considered in order to have a deep understanding of an activity system, and in any activity system Subject and Community are potential sources of disruption.

What it *is* meant to imply is that for this organization, when looking to quickly determine where culture is most likely to be felt, the most bang for their buck would be to start at the corners of the triangle. Assuming that they’ve got agreement on the Object and Outcomes (and they wouldn’t proceed unless they did), the company can then look at the points of the triangle to help affiliates customize and implement successfully. In the

language of the company, “High-impact customization begins at the points of the triangle.” In terms of the tools for the company, this meant modifying the report for customizers and the job aid summarizing the report (see Appendix 2). In the end, I didn’t do a new version of the report for the global group summarizing recommendations about how to approach affiliates with regard to helping them implement training developed at company headquarters. I felt that most of that information was already there in the report for customizers. Instead, we had for the global group the debriefing tool. This could not only be used to debrief specific training initiatives, but these could also be saved over time to create a sort of historical notebook of interventions, such as the SSMPs, which were run on an annual basis.

Looking back on the findings and incidents I have selected to report here, the two which really stand out for me are the two where culture might have been expected to make a difference, but didn’t; the Fire Alarm, and the China and the High Five activity. It never occurred to me when I sought to use Activity Theory to illuminate some of the issues that a global organization might face as it sought to leverage it’s cultural knowledge and improve its international effectiveness, that Activity Theory might not only explain conflicts, but lack of conflict as well. I expected to encounter issues or episodes that were causing problems. I did not expect to find that it would be illuminating, enlightening, or important to be able to explain smooth operation. Yet that was exactly what ended up happening.

To summarize the findings then, I initially found the bottom of the activity triangle to be the right place to start when looking for potential cultural disruptions. However, the data was thin and thus difficult to trust. After expanding our field of inquiry

and reflecting on some key incidents in which culture was a salient factor, I came to the conclusion that the points of the triangle—the Rules, the Tools, and the Division of Labor—were the best place to look for potential cultural disruptions, and I adjusted the tools I'd made for the company accordingly.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

So what does all of this mean? Returning to our research question: Is Activity Theory a useful tool for helping develop and customize training in an international setting? The evidence from the case discussed here is that the answer to that question is yes. Application of the theory led to new insights into how culture was affecting the work of the company, and it also gave the company a framework to use to approach cultural issues systematically. At the same time, success was not unqualified. There was no evidence that the debriefing tool, for example, was ever used by anyone in the company on their own, without me there to coach or facilitate them in its use. In some ways, it is as though the members of the global group were in the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) in their ability to use the tool; they could use it to good effect when with an expert, but couldn't (or didn't) use it on their own.

As for the secondary questions, does culture matter in an international business context? Most people would probably answer intuitively that it does, and indeed this research supports that common-sense conclusion. On several occasions, initiatives that the company wanted to move forward with stumbled on obstacles that were primarily cultural in essence. More interesting is the follow-up question: to what extent does culture matter, and how? Probably the intuitive answer here, especially for people who tend to focus on differences, is that culture matters quite a bit. This research suggests that such a conclusion might be too strong. Yes, culture matters, but there are also times when people can (and do) establish relations with each other that seem to cut right through cultural boundaries. Indeed, there are times when people will willingly step out of their own cultures in order to interact more closely with someone from another culture. The

research here suggests that this can be managed in a systematic way, though follow-up research is necessary to really make that claim. At one point during one of my discussions with a person from the company, I had the following thought: If you think culture matters, you're wrong. But if you think it doesn't matter, you're also wrong. It seemed to me that people are perhaps not well served by their intuitions on culture. People who focus too much on differences, and worry about little things like making sure they get their greetings right, might miss opportunities to make deeper connections based on our shared humanity. In contrast, people who approach the issue of culture by assuming that we're all basically the same at heart, may well unintentionally offend or put off members of the other culture by coming off as indifferent to the uniqueness of their culture. If that is true, then a quick rule of thumb when approaching a new culture might be to act counter to your intuition. If you're thinking that you need to spend time learning cultural rules and getting little things right, then it's worth taking a step back and seeking out commonalities. In contrast, if you're thinking that things will be OK because we're all human at heart, then it would probably be worth learning a few words of greeting and practicing a few cultural gestures.

How does culture matter? The data is stronger here. Assuming you're acting in conjunction with someone from another culture towards a common (shared) goal, then culture matters in the objects and procedures people use to do their work (Tools), in the norms they follow for doing the work (Rules), and in who they expect to do what tasks (Division of Labor). In addition, culture can manifest itself through the interaction of individuals (Subjects) and community (Community). The latter two should not be forgotten, but the data here suggest that these two elements are less important than the

elements at the points of the Activity triangle in determining exactly how culture matters in a given situation.

How can a company come to understand and leverage cultural difference in a multinational environment? Extrapolating from the point just made, a company can do so by looking at the Tools, Rules, and Division of Labor of the target culture, and using the insights gained from that investigation to predict where certain initiatives or training modules might run into trouble. Cultural Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) would play a key role both in helping identify potential problems in those activity elements, and in suggesting ways that such concerns could be addressed.

Ideally, the insights gained from systematically investigating culture in this manner could be saved over time, using something like the debriefing tool in Appendix 1. This would help the company to really leverage their learning over time. This brings up the issue of what tools and procedures would be necessary to support a multi-cultural approach to training (the next of the secondary research questions). The tools I developed for this project are naturally not the only ones conceivable, but something like them would probably be necessary. There should be some communication to customizers about how to implement culturally sensitive and highly effective customization. That communication should also be shared with developers. There should also be some way to capture insights and expectations about culture and how it might affect training initiatives, as well as some way to capture that data over time so that deeper insights can be obtained and so that the learning of the company can be passed on.

What implications do the company's approach have for the field of Instructional Design? First of all, it suggests that we as instructional designers can indeed offer value

when working cross-culturally, and we can do that even if we don't have specific knowledge of a particular culture. What we do have are methods—ways we can systematically approach the question. Details can be filled in by SMEs. What we do have is an understanding that culture is not something that is merely a collection of discreet, idiosyncratic way of doing things; it is something that can be approached intelligently and competently by someone with the right analytical tools.

In addition, the research here suggests that there might be implications for Instructional Design when dealing with other sorts of culture, not just national culture. Although this research did not specifically address culture in that sense, there doesn't seem to be any reason why the discussion here couldn't also be applied to corporate culture, for example. Every company has different ways of doing things; every organization has its own culture. Activity Theory could provide a framework for someone working between or among different organizations, perhaps helping them to work together on a project, perhaps helping them to come together in a joint venture. Again, even without having deep expertise regarding the corporate cultures in question, Activity Theory could provide a framework for approaching the issues systemically and systematically.

As for the theoretical implications of the study, it is worth restating that because of the exploratory nature of the study, the level of generalization sought was to generalize to the theory. Theory, of course, answers the question, "Why?" So in this case, I was interested in seeing whether Activity Theory could provide useful answers to the question of "Why", even when it was applied in a setting and in a way that it rarely has been. Naturally, once the theory met the real world, it was necessary to morph and reshape it in

order to fit the situation on the ground. In its fullest form, Activity Theory is a complex and complicated theory; it was clear early on that some simplification was going to be necessary. This research suggests, however, that Activity Theory proves to be a useful theoretical framework for a company even in a more limited form. Simplifying the theory in a way that made sense for the audience (the global group) while still remaining true to the theory itself was a difficult balancing act accomplished largely by trial and error. Yet, as mentioned earlier, by the end of the research I had reduced Activity Theory to two key concepts: the Elements of Activity, and the Concept of Contradiction (or disruption). Both of these seemed to make sense to the members of the global group, and thinking along these lines seemed to help them come to insights about how culture was affecting the work that they did and how they might address some of the concerns that arose from the work that they did.

Some customization was necessary however. For example, there was some fiddling with the nomenclature regarding the Elements of Activity. This not only helped make the theory more accessible to the global group, but in some cases made a stronger connection to the theory than the original wording did. Calling Division of Labor “Roles and Responsibilities” was, I thought, an especially nice touch. Not only was it a phrasing they were used to, saying “Roles and Responsibilities” in some ways captures more completely what that corner of the triangle is really all about. Yes, it’s how the labor is divided, but what does that really mean? It means that responsibility is divided, and it means that roles are given (and accepted). This is no mere “division” of labor, like the dividing of a cake; society assigns certain roles to certain people, and they are expected to act in a particular sort of way and discharge particular sorts of responsibility when they

are in those roles. To say “Roles and Responsibilities” is in some sense a more fundamental phrasing with deeper implications for the behavior expected of participants in an activity; it gets to the heart of that corner of the triangle in a way that the original phrasing doesn’t.

In addition, the reconceptualization of the Object element has some interesting theoretical ramifications. It moves the “true motive” of the Activity to the Outcome element, and it also serves to de-emphasize Object, so that it becomes more on par with the other Elements of Activity, rather than the primary focus. This reconceptualization was in some sense something of a natural experiment. It was not a goal of the research to examine what would happen if one reconceptualized the Object element, yet that very reconceptualization allowed some insight into how the rest of the theory adapted and responded to this different application. Without making any claims about how regularly this would occur, in this case the reconceptualization of Object allowed Activity Theory to function more like a traditional tool, and it brought the idea of the Elements of Activity, as well as the idea of Contradiction, to the forefront. Others have written on how pursuing an evolving (or otherwise nebulously constituted) Object can be insightful (at least from the point of view of the ones doing the writing); this research shows that other aspects of Activity Theory also have the capacity to allow for insightful realizations.

But despite (because of?) the reconceptualization of Object, and despite changing some of the wording, the two concepts of the Elements of Activity and Contradiction (or disruption) came through relatively intact, and ended up being the basis for much of the work done by the global group as they applied Activity Theory to what they do. Therefore, to the extent that Activity Theory was able to make a difference for the global

group and contribute to the company, it was able to do so even in this simplified form, which focused primarily on those two aspects.

Further theoretical implication is found in the incident with China and the High Five activity. Although I made little comment at the time, the illustration I have there of the Activity System, with a whole new triangle occupying the Rules space, is actually a strong departure from orthodoxy (as far as there is an orthodoxy around Activity Theory). I am unaware of any other researcher using Activity Theory who has talked about nested Activity Systems. In some sense, there may be good reason for that. For one thing, it immediately opens up the possibility of infinite regression. A critic might dismissively ask if there's a homunculus Activity System deep in there somewhere. For another, it adds a level of complexity to an already complex system. Yet much of the staying power of a theory (or model) depends on how useful it is. In this case, portraying the system as nested is useful in that it leads to interesting insights about what was going on during that sales conference and why the participants there were able to slice through cultural barriers. As stated earlier, it implies that the Rules element is deep and rich in intriguing ways. Typically, the Elements of Activity are portrayed as theoretical equals. While one element or another is often the focus of a particular situation, there is no sense that the elements themselves might work in different ways or in and of themselves be differently complex.

The Rules element is certainly not the only one that could be analyzed as an Activity System in and of itself. Critical Researchers may find the Division of Labor element interesting in that there are probably whole Activity Systems for imposing, accepting, and negotiating divisions of labor in society, especially as regards how those

divisions reflect issues of power, social capital, and the applications thereof. True, another way to say all of that would be to focus on such divisions as the Activity System of interest and analyze the system in a more conventional way. Certainly Activity Theory is very flexible in terms of the grain level at which it can usefully be applied; it can be applied to large complex systems or to classroom interactions. But nesting the systems allows the analysis to ground the phenomenon more concretely in a wider context, and thus adds a level of explanatory power. In many ways, life itself is nested. With a slight theoretical realignment, Activity Theory can show this.

Further theoretical implication can be found in the incident involving China and Relationship Selling. This incident suggests that there may be more than one sort of Level 1 contradiction; specifically, that there may be Activity Systems which are trundling along carrying potential contradictions due to parallel processes, as opposed to absolute contradictions due to conflicting processes. No “typology of contradictions” exists for Activity Theory (that I am aware of), and certainly having one incident in which there are different types of contradictions doesn’t necessarily mean that it would be useful or helpful to run off and start categorizing everything. The implications are interesting though, as the different types of contradiction would imply different types of Activity in the System, as well as different responses to ameliorate the contradictions and make the system(s) function more smoothly.

### **Limitations of the study**

Some of the limitations of this study have been touched upon in the discussion above. This section brings them all into one place. Probably the biggest limitation of this

study was its one-sidedness. It would have been interesting and enlightening to hear what trainers and managers in the affiliates thought of the work done by the global group, and to hear about incidents and anecdotes from them. Given both the financial and business constraints under which this research was done, that was simply impossible. However, my sense in working with the global group, and especially with the manager, was that they were well aware of the importance of the voices of the affiliates, and worked hard to make sure that they understood their needs and desires. That's not a substitute for hearing the affiliates' voices directly, but I did at least feel that the filter I had to work with was an honest and well-intentioned one.

A second limitation of the study was its artificial end point. Once we had our new conclusions and our re-written tools, I made my final presentation to the company and drew a line under the research. It was time to stop. We had reached a new and enlightening conclusion, and new personnel movement in the company meant that of the seven original members of the global group, at the time of my final presentation, only one remained. The constant personnel changes were making it increasingly hard to proceed. But business, and life, goes on. The company continues to develop new global initiatives, it continues to seek global efficiencies, it continues to strive to become more global in its essence. I am no longer a part of that. Because of that, it won't be possible to examine the long term effects of Activity Theory on the way the company behaves. Did they incorporate Activity Theory into their way of doing things, or will they revert to the old ways of doing things? Has their vocabulary changed? Have their discussions changed? Are they more or less willing to take cultural "risks"? It is possible to be pessimistic here. As mentioned above, the members of the global group were able to use the tools I

developed for them to good effect, as long as I was there. They seemed comfortable enough with the idea of Activity Theory, as long as I was there. There was no evidence that they used any of the tools without me, there was no evidence that they talked about Activity Theory when I wasn't there. All of this suggests that once I left, the use of Activity Theory to make sense of culture probably stopped.

And yet, mere pessimism is probably too strong. Activity Theory is complex and complicated. It's probably unreasonable to expect a company to internalize it over the space of just a few months. It is encouraging that the members of the global group seemed increasingly comfortable using some of the vocabulary of Activity Theory, especially regarding the Elements of Activity. At the final presentation I suggested that high-impact customization begins at the corners of the triangle; this was a concise and well-received characterization. They had a good sense of what Tools, Rules, and Division of Labor (or Roles and Responsibilities) were, and it made sense to them that these areas were the right areas to focus on when customizing. They may not speak of "Activity Theory" much, but they would be able to talk about the importance of rules, the importance of finding the right person to do the right tasks, and of accomplishing goals using tools and procedures consistent with the way things are done in a particular affiliate.

The case for optimism rests on that. It may be that there *was* change in the group—not a large one where they began to move in completely different directions, but a subtle though nonetheless important one where they changed how they approached the affiliates regarding customization. If, as a result of this research, they could focus their efforts more effectively; then Activity Theory did indeed add value for them. Nonetheless,

it remains a limitation of this study that it ended when it did, when there were just beginning to be hints of internalization.

### **Further research**

There are several questions raised by this research which deserve to be examined in the future. For example, I speculated earlier that people might not be well-served by their intuitions on culture. Well, what *are* people's intuitions on culture? And do people with different intuitions approach their cross-cultural work differently? To put it another way, does it really matter what your intuitions on culture are, will it affect how you approach your work when working across national boundaries? There could be some interesting research done in this area. Possible outcomes would include a questionnaire or self-assessment for making overt one's intuitions (or knowledge) about culture, with a matched tool of suggestions for how to effectively approach a different culture given your own sense of what is and isn't important when dealing with people from other countries. Certainly something like that would be both useful and interesting from a research point of view.

A second area for further research would involve trying to get a better sense of how long it takes for a company to internalize Activity Theory, and what the variables involved would be. Would smaller groups internalize things faster, or not? Is there a point of diminishing returns regarding the time a group spent working with Activity Theory vs. how quickly they internalized it? If so, what is it? Obviously, questions like these would lead to attempts to find ways to shorten that timeframe and get Activity Theory integrated

quickly, which would mean that part of that research would involve determining what tools and procedures might make that acquisition faster.

Perhaps as a first step towards answering those sorts of questions, another area of follow-up research which I hope will happen is to go back to the global group in a year's time and see how much of Activity Theory and the work that we did is still there in any recognizable form. If it's not there, what are they doing instead to achieve their global goals? (It is probably reasonable to assume that they'll still be working internationally and will still be seeking global efficiencies.) To put it another way, this research gives us some confidence in saying that Activity Theory can be a useful tool for companies looking to design training for international environments, but is it better than other options? If so, what are its strengths? If not, what are its weaknesses?

Another important piece of further research would be to take what was done here and see how well it works in a different company, preferably in a different field. This is just one case, which is fine for a descriptive case study, but the desire is that it be instrumental as well. Just how well would Activity Theory work for a different company? Would they come to broadly the same conclusions? Would the tools created for this company add value for other multi-national companies? Being able to take this research to other companies would greatly enhance our understandings about Activity Theory.

In addition, there is that richness of the Rules element. My sense from having done this research is that there is much going on there, probably more than what goes on in the other elements. There are rules for breaking rules, there are rules acknowledged and unacknowledged, there are rules that people follow without even really being aware of them. Some of this is also true of other elements (there are tools for using tools, for

example), but it might be that there is enough in the rules element that someone could conceivably write a dissertation focused solely on that one element. Again, in addition to enhancing our theoretical understanding of Activity Theory, such research would no doubt have direct practical application as well.

Along the same lines, this research suggests that it is possible to reconceptualize the Elements of Activity in a way that admittedly makes it more complex (which, granted, might be the last thing the theory needs) by nesting whole activity systems at certain points of the triangle. In this case, nesting another Activity System in the Rules element brought to light the fact that something complex was going on with the High Five activity in China, and getting inside that “something” helped make clear the contrast with the other key incident involving China, which further helped explain why things worked in the one case but took forever to resolve in the other. All of this suggests an interesting line of research. What are the factors that allow some people to be better at this than others, and are there tools we can develop that would help identify such people? How can we better prepare people to engage in the activity of stepping outside of their activity system? How can we better prepare trainers for helping people to do that?

There is additional further research that could be done. Activity Theory is a rich and complex theory that has seen a lot of application in educational settings and some application in business settings. Bringing it to the realm of international business would help further theoretical understandings about the theory and help companies to function more effectively and efficiently as well.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Opposite things are simultaneously true, but mutually exclusive things are not. What this suggests is that simultaneously true opposite things probably share a deeper unity. Systematic inquiry is one way to come to an understanding of that deeper unity, and that understanding can be translated into practical action. The research done here suggests that Activity Theory is a useful tool for examining issues of culture where our shared humanity manifests itself in different ways; not merely as a discreet collection of idiosyncratic customs, but systemically in the way we approach human activity. Specifically, the research here suggests that

- Activity Theory is a useful tool for examining issues of culture in international business
- Activity Theory can be the basis for useful tools which help bring cultural issues to the surface
- Culture is likely to manifest itself in the Rules, Tools, and Division of Labor of human activity

The research here further suggests that the process of integrating Activity Theory into a workplace setting unfamiliar with it is no easy task. An expert, who can serve as a coach or a guide, is almost certainly a necessary component. In addition, some simplification of the theory is probably necessary, especially for a business audience. Fortunately, this research suggests that such simplification can be done in a way that both preserves the essential nature of Activity Theory and allows for useful application of the theory.

Moreover, the research here suggests that there are ways to create circumstances or situations in which people can be encouraged to step out of their own culture. A good sense of the audience is important in attempting to do that, as is a recognition that people are more likely to accept such a situation if the cultural breach is well-defined and limited in scope.

But properly managed, the rewards for having tools which help leverage culture can be great. Multi-national companies seeking global efficiencies would be more likely to achieve their goals in ways consistent with the mantra of seeking commitment, not compliance, if they have such tools. They would be able to approach their affiliates intelligently: seeking agreement on Objects and Outcome, leaving responsibility for implementation with the affiliates, and still being able to offer advice on how to customize business initiatives for that affiliate while still maintaining alignment with the agreed upon goals.

As for me personally, I hope in the future to have the opportunity to work with another international organization and apply some of what I learned in this study to a new situation. In that case, I would start with the simplified version of the theory that I ended up using, emphasizing the importance of the Elements of Activity and the idea of contradiction. I would also keep my eyes open for nested systems, as the idea of nested systems of activity seems to have great explanatory potential. I would sell my new clients on Activity Theory's ability to lay open some complex human behavior, and show why and under what circumstances some interventions are more effective than others.

Much has been written about globalization. This is not the place to write more. However, one way of managing the "shrinking" of the world and the valuing of diversity

which supports the pride and preservation of different cultures, two issues brought to a head by globalization, would be to use tools like Activity Theory which can help align those two forces and bring them together. The world can both shrink and be diverse. We have the tools that can enable us to create such a world.

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# Activity Worksheet

## Appendix 1

Date \_\_\_\_\_

<p><b>Activity of Interest</b>— What activity would you like to debrief?</p>	
<p><b>Object of activity</b>— What is the focus of this activity? What changes as a result of it?</p>	
<p><b>Subjects</b> in this activity— Who are the <i>Key Players</i> involved in carrying out this activity?</p>	
<p><b>Tools</b> mediating the activity— By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity? What procedures and processes do they use?</p>	
<p><b>Rules</b> and regulations mediating the activity— Are there any cultural norms, rules or regulations impacting the success of this activity?</p>	
<p><b>Division of labor</b> mediating the activity— What are the <i>Roles and Responsibilities</i> of the Key Players, and how are the rules organized?</p>	
<p><b>Community</b> in which activity is conducted— What are the Stakeholder Groups involved in carrying out the activity. (What is the environment in which this activity is carried out?)</p>	
<p>What is the desired <b>Outcome</b> from carrying out this activity?</p>	

Debrief on: \_\_\_\_\_

Contradictions/Problems Identified	Potential Solutions	Implementation Plan for Solution	Follow-up/Evaluation of Effectiveness	Lessons Learned

Appendix 2

## Culturally Smart Customization

*Critical Success Factors for customizing training for your affiliate*

Customizing training modules and events for maximum impact in your affiliate can be challenging, but if done well the benefits to the company, the affiliate, and to you can be substantial.



Although some adjustments may have to be made to the content of the training program, content is typically not the problem. How that content is presented, however, can make a big difference. Below are some Critical Success Factors for taking training modules and programs and adapting them to your affiliate. Keep in mind that your goal as a customizer is to

### Create a link between the training and your affiliate's reality.

The following Critical Success Factors can guide you to customization that is culturally smart and right for your affiliate.

- 1) Understand the Training
  - **Understand** the goals of the training and the desired outcome
  - **Know** who is involved and who is affected (both individuals and groups)
  
- 2) Target your Customization
  - **Apply** your knowledge of the Social Rules. Consider how the rules of the affiliate might enhance the training, or where the training might violate the rules. If you choose to allow a social rule to be broken, make sure it is temporary and under well-defined conditions.
  - **Determine** the impact on current tools and procedures. How would the current way of doing things be affected by the training? What would have to change, and how?
  - **Consider** how to divide the Roles and Responsibilities. The right influential people need to do the right tasks.



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Education      PhD Candidate—Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University (Current)  
*Dissertation*—Activity theory as a lens for considering culture: A descriptive case study of a multinational company developing and supporting training around the world. (Passed Oral Defense on 16 November 2005)  
*Dissertation Chair*: Dr. Thomas Schwen

MA—Applied Linguistics, Indiana University (Dec. 1996)

BA—Creative Writing, Beloit College (May 1987)

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Research Experience      Research Associate—NSF Information Technology Workforce Grant (Award # 03050859), Indiana University (2004– )

- Designed and developed interview protocol for investigating student experiences in IT-related majors
- Conducted over 150 face-to-face interviews at 5 research universities with undergraduates, graduates, faculty, and staff
- Currently collaborating with PIs on preparation of manuscripts for publication

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Teaching Experience      Assistant Instructor—R620 Task Analysis, Indiana University (2000–2004)

- Coached students on Task Analysis projects
- Assisted with project grading and made occasional class presentations
- Worked closely with Drs. Thomas Schwen & Ivor Davies

Assistant Instructor—R621 Needs Analysis, Indiana University (1999–2003)

- Advised students on client consulting issues dealing with politics, ethics, and performance
- Assisted with project grading and made occasional class presentations
- Worked closely with Drs. Thomas Schwen & Ivor Davies

Associate Instructor—Center for English Language Training, Indiana University (1995–2003)

- Designed, developed, and delivered a course on introductory computer skills for international students
- As Level Coordinator, supervised 12 other teachers and acted as a liaison between the students and the program
- Served as an in-house computer consultant to the CELT student body
- Served as liaison between CELT and the university for all computer-related problems and needs

Assistant English Teacher—Kanaya Jr. High School, Kanaya-cho, Japan (1991–1995)

- Team-taught English classes for 800 students in 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> grades

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- Coached students in the regional English Speaking contest
  - Supervised students after school and during morning cleaning

English Teacher, Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (1987–1990)

- Taught English classes for students from pre-school to adult
  - Conducted weekly discussion/conversation group for students at Shizuoka University
  - Conducted weekly English Bible discussions at Oshika Lutheran Church
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Professional Experience

Instructional Design/Developer—Global Senior Sales Manager Starter Kit Project, Eli Lilly and Co. (2003)

- Enhanced the performance of new Senior Sales Managers worldwide by modifying the existing Starter Kit (see below) for use globally
- Motivated learners by embedding learning points into stories from experienced managers
- Incorporated the creation of deliverables the managers were routinely responsible for into the activities of the kit
- Tested and revised the kit based on feedback from individuals in 7 countries across all regions of the world

Instructional Design/Developer—Sales Director Starter Kit Project, Eli Lilly and Co. (2002)

- Enhanced the performance of new Sales Directors by creating a self-instructional Starter Kit training module
- Motivated learners by embedding learning points into stories from experienced managers
- Incorporated the creation of deliverables the managers were routinely responsible for into the activities of the kit
- Rescued the project when the relationship with the original vendor became problematic

Instructional Design/Developer, Corporate Researcher—Effective Training in an International Environment, Eli Lilly and Co. (2001–2003)

- Highlighted potential cultural conflicts using Activity Theory as a lens for examining the activities of developing and delivering training internationally
- Designed training session in Japan to intelligently leverage cultural knowledge
- Developed reflection and knowledge management Tools based on Activity Theory

Process Analyst—Medical Necessity Certification Nurse, Bloomington Hospital (2000)

- Enabled Bloomington Hospital to meet new Medicare regulations regarding medical necessity by developing the processes for a new position: the Medical Necessity Certification Nurse
- Analyzed and charted the changes that would result to four processes as a result of the new Medicare regulations
- Enhanced training and implementation of the new processes by creating new process flowcharts

Needs Analyst—Structure and Operations, Monroe County Humane Association (1998)

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conducted a comprehensive needs analysis of the structure and operations of the Monroe County Humane Association over a 6-week period as part of a team of three</li> <li>▪ Increased the effectiveness of the board by streamlining internal communications and identifying areas of concern</li> </ul>
Publications & Presentations	<p>Marken, J. A. (in press). An application of activity theory. <i>Performance Improvement Quarterly</i>.</p> <p>Bichelmeyer, B., Marken, J.A., Harris, T., Misanchuk, M., Hixon, E. (in press). Instruction for emotional intelligence: Principles for teaching and learning in the affective domain. In Charles M. Reigeluth and Alison Carr-Chellman (Eds.) <i>Instructional-Design Theories and Models, Volume III: A New Paradigm of Instructional Theory</i>. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.</p> <p>Herring, S.C., Marken, J.A. Implications of Gender Consciousness for Students in IT Programs. Proposal submitted to 2006 AERA Annual conference.</p> <p>Marken, J. A. (April, 2004). Activity theory as a tool for helping develop and customize training in an international setting: useful or not? Annual conference of the International Society of Performance Improvement: Tampa, FL.</p> <p>Johnston, B., Juhász, A., Marken, J., and Ruiz, B.R. (1998). The ESL teacher as moral agent. <i>Research in the Teaching of English</i>, 32, 161-181.</p>
Awards & Grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 2004 Beechler Fellowship</li> </ul>
Professional Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Academy of Management</li> <li>▪ American Educational Research Association</li> <li>▪ American Society of Training and Development</li> <li>▪ Association of Educational Communications and Technology</li> <li>▪ International Society of Performance Improvement</li> </ul>
Service	<p>Reviewer, Instructional Systems Track, ISPI Annual Conference (2005)</p> <p>University Elementary School PTO, Learning Festival Prize Coordinator (2004– )</p> <p>Hunger Issues Coordinator, St. Thomas Lutheran Church (2003–2004)</p> <p>University Elementary School PTO, Newsletter Editor (2002–2003)</p> <p>Japanese Language &amp; Culture Forum Moderator, animeondvd.com (2000– )</p>
Other Work Experience	<p>Senior Network Consultant, Indiana University Halls of Residence (2000)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Supervised 15 Network Consultants serving all campus residence halls</li> <li>▪ Served as “consultant of next resort” when Network Consultants encountered unusual or difficult problems</li> </ul> <p>Network Consultant, IU Halls of Residence (1997–2000)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Set-up network connectivity in apartments</li> <li>▪ Performed in-apartment network troubleshooting and repair</li> <li>▪ Maintained the building computer lab</li> </ul> <p>Overseas Marketing, Tomoegawa Seishi (1990–1991)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Smoothed international operations by serving as the liaison between the</li> </ul>

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Tokyo office and the US subsidiary in Chicago

- Handled all overseas inquiries
  - Translated at meetings for English-speaking guests
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