Mediated Action and Mediated Discourse Analysis: Studying Learning and Becoming at the Nexus of Practice

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Abstract: The purpose of the workshop is to explore the closely related frameworks of *mediated action* (MA) (Wertsch, 1998) and *mediated discourse analysis* (MDA) (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). In the spirit of a study group, participants will 1) engage in a dialogue around what these frameworks can bring to the learning sciences, 2) get hands-on experience analysing empirical material from these two perspectives, 3) discuss their own research practices within these frames. One anticipated outcome of the workshop is the development of a research agenda and an international network in the learning sciences with a particular focus on MA/MDA.

Workshop Description and Goals

The goal of this workshop is to explore how learning science research might be informed by the closely related frameworks of *mediated action* (Wertsch, 1991, 1998) and *mediated discourse analysis* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). In line with the conference theme, both perspectives focus on processes of becoming through engagement in practice, and how these processes of becoming are realized through communication and participation in value-laden settings of action.

MA theory explores how mind is realized in and through action, and how forms and processes of realization are mediated by semiotic and material "cultural tools." This approach takes *action*, as opposed to either individuals or sociocultural environments, as the fundamental unit of analysis for studying learning and psychological development in general. MDA builds directly on the MA framework, adding specific emphases on, first, the role of discourse as a form of action through which mind, identity, positionality, and social collectives are realized; and, second, an ethnographic understanding of the "sites of engagement" in which action takes place, including the range of semiotic and material tools that intersect in action.

Both frameworks seek analytically to adopt a focus not exclusively on individual actors, nor on social groups or institutions, nor on mediational means, but rather on the "nexus of practice" at which these intersect and are brought concretely into engagement (Scollon, 2005, p. 20). This focus keeps alive the complexity of meanings and practices that bind communities together and make up individuals' identities over time. Both approaches aim at deepening our understanding of how sociocultural processes shape and mold people's lives and identities, and both are interested in better understanding how discourses, practices and mediations sometimes constitute opportunities for actions, but sometimes also contribute to limiting action and imagination. Each of these interests has also been a key focus of recent work in the learning sciences.

Despite these commonalities, and despite the international and interdisciplinary reach of both perspectives, researchers in the two fields have seldom had formal opportunities to meet together to exchange ideas and mutually develop the perspectives. One of the major goals of the workshop, then, is to bring together scholars influenced by these two traditions for dialogue and exchange on a central question of this year's conference: How does engagement in practice bring individuals to become certain kinds of persons over time. More specifically, the workshop would like to take up questions such as: How does learning contribute to new individual and social trajectories? How does it help people to imagine or make connections to different possible futures (de Saint-Georges, 2012; O'Connor & Allen, 2010)?

A second goal of the workshop is to give attendees hands-on experience using MA/MDA as analytical and methodological perspectives. In small groups, participants will be invited to unpack and discuss empirical material thematizing different aspects of "learning and becoming" from these perspectives. Finally, attendees will also be asked to discuss their own research agendas and practices as they are developing them within the frameworks under discussion or within related approaches.

By the end of the workshop, we hope to foster the creation of an international network in the learning sciences around MA/MDA. To make this network concrete, an academic blog will be launched on Hypotheses.org, a platform aimed at enhancing visibility of research in the humanities and social sciences. Attendees will be free to disseminate their work through this platform, which can also become a space for organizing future encounters and events beyond ICLS2014.

Why an International Network in the Learning Sciences around MA/MDA?

It might be timely to reflect about the rationale behind developing an international network in the learning sciences around MA/MDA now. Wertsch's sociocultural theory has developed over the last thirty years. Scollon and Scollon's mediated discourse analysis is a bit more recent dating back only to the late 90s (Norris & Jones,

2005; Scollon & de Saint-Georges, 2011). Over the last decades, both frameworks have attracted the attention of a growing body of researchers who have found in these approaches ways of responding to thorny epistemological and methodological questions. For example, MA has attracted researchers by offering concrete tools to approach in a more principled way the relationship between processes across multiple timescales, focusing as it does not just on the moment-by-moment unfolding of actions but also on the multiple social, historical, and cultural processes that traverse these actions through the cultural tools used to perform them. To the interested researcher, MA has designed a way to overcome the traditional dichotomy between the mind and the social. It has also helped in theorizing the role of cultural experiences and material and symbolic resources in developmental processes (Zittoun, 2006).

As for MDA, researchers attracted to this framework often highlight two important reasons for turning to this approach. The first reason is the interest MDA has in beginning investigations not so much from theoretical or methodological questions but from real-life 'problem' or 'social issue' and then considering which actions, practices and discourses might be constitutive of these issues (Scollon, 2005). It makes this framework particularly adapted to design research with an impact, as well as to reflect about the position of researchers as producers of discourses and actions which might affect the very nexus they study. A second dimension that is often highlighted as a reason for adopting MDA is its commitment to interdisciplinarity. As Hult (2010) puts it, MDA is a form of 'meta-methodology' which aggregates the findings and tools from diverse disciplinary orientations (e.g. interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, critical discourse analysis, social semiotics, mediated action, cultural psychology, etc.) to put them in the service of addressing the problems of interest. In that, MDA thus also offer a framework for overcoming traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Interested in the affordances these frameworks offer, an increasing number of researchers are engaging in using 'mediated action' in their investigation or in doing 'mediated discourse analysis' or 'nexus analysis' in various fields and geographical areas. In the field of 'mediated discourse analysis', for example, the *Jyväskylä Discourse Research hub (University of Jyväskylä)* and the *Peripheral Multilingualism (Academy of Finland)* have recently launched a joint 'reading group' on nexus analysis (the methodological arm of MDA) which is bringing together scholars from eight different countries across the US and Europe to discuss their work in virtual space in relation to this framework (http://www.discoursehub.fi/events/jyvaskyla-discourse-research-hub/). Internationally, there has been research done in the field of multilingualism and language policy (Hult , 2014; Compton 2014), political discourse (Dunne, 2003; Shroyer, 2004), disability studies (Al Zidjali, 2006), risk communication and management (Jones, 2013), digital literacies (Jones & Hafner, 2012), workplace practices (Serwe & de Saint-Georges, 2014; de Saint-Georges, forthcoming a, b), identity (Lane, 2010, 2011) to name but a few areas. There is also today a clear strand of research which, following the seminal work of Scollon on the learning of intercultural practices by a one-year old (Scollon, 2001), has taken on MDA in the field of learning and education with, for example, studies on the nexus of literacies, play and technologies in early childhood (Wohlwend, 2009a, b, c, 2011, 2013; Wohlwend & Handsfield, 2012), learning in vocational education (de Saint-Georges, forthcoming a, b), writing practices in secondary English Education (Rish, 2011), learning in various informal contexts (Norris, 2011; Jocuns 2007, 2009), international supervision (Soukup & Kordon, 2012), etc.

The field of mediated action, with its interest in how mediational means become appropriated and mastered and serve developmental processes, has long resonated with the learning sciences. Here the focus has been not only on learning (Herrenkohl & Mertl, 2011; Herrenkohl & Wertsch, 1999; Polman, 2006), but also on domains such as transitions (Zittoun 2006), moral functioning (Tappan 2006), identity (Wertsch & Penuel, 1995a, 1995b), and historical identity and representation (Wertsch, 2002; Wertsch & O'Connor, 1994). Throughout this body of work, attention has been paid to processes of learning and becoming, and to the contingency of the appropriation of cultural tools in the production of trajectories (O'Connor & Allen, 2010; Penuel & O'Connor, 2010).

As we can see from this short account, MA and MDA are lively, dynamic and growing fields of inquiry. Despite this growth however, there are no journals or conferences dedicated specifically to these approaches, nor real forums to exchange and debate about them. The benefits of such exchanges between researchers are, however, clear. They would allow to debate about epistemological, methodological and theoretical perspectives in deeper ways. For this, the creation of an international network seemed suited to the task, and ICLS seems a perfect venue to lay the ground for such a network.

Practical Organization

Audience

We conceive of the workshop as kind of study group where participants read, listen, analyse, comment, learn together and build an agenda for research collectively. We welcome scholars at any level (masters and doctoral students, post-docs and established researchers) including those who are beginning to explore how an MA/MDA framework can enrich their own understanding of 'learning and becoming in practice' as well as those who

already have a longer history of research in the learning sciences with one of these frameworks as their starting point (or related approaches such as, e.g. cultural-historical activity theory, discourse analysis, actor-network theory).

Pre-conference Preparation

To ensure lively discussions, a few preparation steps are required from prospective attendees.

1) Prior to the event, prospective participants are invited to send to Ingrid de Saint-Georges (Ingrid.desaintgeorges@uni.lu) and Kevin O'Connor (kevin.oconnor@Boulder.EDU), a half-page summary of their research interests as they relate to the theme of the workshop, including specification of research focus and level of familiarity with the related frameworks of MA and MDA. While preference will be given to participants who are already working at the interface between MA/MDA (or related approaches such as, e.g., cultural-historical activity theory, discourse analysis, actor-network theory) and the learning sciences, other participants who can show how their research would benefit from exploring these two frameworks or who are just curious about it are most welcome too. The summary will also enable the organizers to group participants according to their interests for some of the workshop activities.

2) In addition to this half-page summary, prospective participants will also be sent a short reading package as well as a general bibliography to prepare for work together. It will be expected that all attendees have prepared themselves for participation in the workshop through reading these documents.

3) If participants so wish, there will be also the possibility to take on a more active role in the workshop, for example, by bringing some data for exploration by the group, or by bringing up some issues and topics for discussion. In this case, the participants should contact the organizers prior to the workshop (ingrid.desaintgeorges@uni.lu and Kevin.Oconnor@Colorado.EDU) so that we can communicate more information about the specific format this intervention could take.

Facilitators and Worskhop Organizers

The workshop organizers as well as the facilitators who will lead the workshop have all long-term expertise in the field of Mediated Action and Mediated Discourse Analysis and come from various geographical areas.

Andrew Jocuns is a Research Lecturer at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. His research has focused on learning in a variety of contexts including: Balinese Gamelan in the US, engineering students, STEM professionals, homebrewers, and sociolinguistics in Indonesian Borneo. Presently he is conducting research on STEM students in Southeast Asia. His research has used mediated discourse analysis and related theories (e.g. distributed cognition) to identify patterns of informal learning such as the use of participation structures by students. Jocuns' articles have appeared in *Semiotica, Mind, Culture, Activity* or the *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, among others.

Sigrid Norris is Associate-Professor of Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. Her current research is in the field of multimodality in everyday life, identity, and learning. She has been active in the field of Mediated Discourse Analysis for the last ten years, developing it further theoretically and methodologically, to for example, study the learning of how to smell perfume or the learning of tacit classroom participation in an art school. She is the author of *Multimodality in practice: Investigating theory-in-practice-through-Methodology* (2012), *Identity in (Inter)action: Introducing Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis* (2011), *Discourse in Action: Introducing Mediated Discourse Analysis* (2005, with R. Jones), *Analyzing Multimodal Interaction: A methodological Framework* (2004).

Kevin O'Connor is currently Assistant Professor in Educational Psychology and Learning Sciences at the University of Colorado Boulder. His research focuses on communication and learning in a variety of contexts, including engineering education and community organizing. His publications have long drawn on the Mediated Action framework (e.g., Wertsch & O'Connor, 1994) and have used this and closely related approaches to frame his ethnographic and discourse analytic research on learning. He is co-editor of a volume of the *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* on "Learning research as a human science," and his work has also been published in *Mind, Culture, & Activity; Linguistics & Education; Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, and the *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science,* among others.

Ingrid de Saint-Georges is an Associate-Professor in the field of Education and Learning at the University of Luxembourg. She studies communication, professional development, and learning in different contexts, including work and vocational education. She is an early contributor to the development of Mediated Discourse Analysis (see e.g. Scollon & de saint-Georges, 2013), a framework she uses to examine learning in situations of increased mobility and diversity. She is the co-author and editor of several books, including (in English):

Multilingualism and Multimodality: Current Challenges for Educational Studies (2013, with J-J Weber), *Multilingualism and Mobility in Europe: Policies and practices* (forthcoming 2014, with J.J Weber & K. Horner), *Multilingualism: Opportunities and Challenges* (forthcoming 2014, with N. Morys, G. Gretsch & C. Kirsch).

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