Open Discussions of Cultural-Historical Activity Inquiry Questions

Alain Breuleux, McGill University, alain.breuleux@mcgill.ca
Thérèse Laferrière, Laval University, therese.laferriere@fse.ulaval.ca
Sylvie Barma, Laval University, sylvie.barma@fse.ulaval.ca
Gyeong Mi Heo, McGill University, gyeongmi.heo@mcgill.ca
Stephanie Beck, McGill University, stephanie.beck2@mail.mcgill.ca
Nilou Baradaran, McGill University, niloufar.baradaranrahmani@mail.mcgill.ca
Alice Vanlint, Laval University, alice.vanlint@fse.ulaval.ca

Abstract: This study presents initial analyses of a sample of historical activity inquiry questions formulated by presenters at the 2017 congress of the International Society for Cultural-historical Activity Research (ISCAR) participating in an activity entitled Open discussions of shared problems. Results point to the problems that generated most interest (e.g., participation) and a majority of problems of a practical nature (intervention and research). We propose reflection on implications as regards to theory advances.

Background

The International Society for Cultural-historical Activity Research (ISCAR), a society that holds its congress every three years, met in Quebec City in late August 2017. The theme of the congress was *Taking a 360° view of the landscape of cultural-historical activity research: The state of our scholarship in practice.* The three main subthemes were: Foundations, Practices and INsights (meaning future intervention and research). In an attempt to provide opportunities for participation similar to those many ISCAR members promote when moving away from "assembly-line instruction", the Local Program Committee (LPC) introduced into the program the activity *Open discussions of shared problems* (OD-SPs). At first, the online platform prompted authors submitting an abstract to also send one or more question(s) they would like to discuss. Next, we analyzed the questions in an attempt to find similarities: three themes and 14 subthemes emerged. *Participation* stood out, and the LPC took it as validating its own emphasis on participation and dialogue in the congress' program. Over 200 delegates who clearly manifested interest in OD-SPs, and all others, were invited to join one or another of the 25-30 groups that were to focus their discussions on a question or a cluster of questions. The discussions spread over three days, and each session lasted 50 minutes. No other congress activity was scheduled at the same time.

Conceptual framework

Participation being our organizing concept for the congress, it was natural to adapt it to the process for the OD-SP activity put forward in the ISCAR 2017 Congress. We found Rogoff's perspective on participation and activity to be particularly suited, and we invited her to present an organizing framework. The framework built on Rogoff's (1997, p. 266) concept of activity and the suggestion that levels of analysis ought to be integrated Rogoff (1995) stressed that one "may consider a single person thinking or the functioning of a whole community in the foreground without assuming that they are actually separate elements".

It also built on Rogoff's (1995) definition of learning as transformation of participation, and her three lenses for participation analysis:

1. Participatory appropriation, which refers to the process by which individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation.

2. Guided participation, which refers to the processes and systems of involvement between people as they communicate and coordinate efforts while participating in culturally valued activity.

3. Apprenticeship, a term that applies not only to individuals but also to a small group in a community with specialization of roles oriented toward the accomplishment of goals that relate the group to others outside of the group.

The family of sociocultural theories, of which Rogoff is a prominent figure, does not distinguish boundaries between theory, methods and practice (Rogoff, 1997, p. 265). This paper reports on contents and process of the OD-SP activity at the ISCAR 2017 Congress. Its three objectives are as follows:

1. To document the participation process in OD-SP groups.

2. To identify the preoccupations of ISCAR 2017 participants.

3. To formulate promising ideas at the theoretical and methodological levels.

Methodology

The method of participation in the OD-SP was *knowledge building*, as defined by Scardamalia and Bereiter (2014) as "the production and continual improvement of ideas of value to a community" (p. 1370). Each group was to focus on a question/cluster of questions/problem, and six knowledge-building scaffolds were suggested: My theory, New information, A better theory, I need to understand, This theory cannot explain, and Putting our knowledge together. A collaborative online platform, Knowledge Forum, was made available for extended social interaction among participants within and between groups.

Participants

104 authors who submitted abstracts/proposals also submitted at least one question, writing a few lines to a few paragraphs. Most of them already had a doctorate. Doctoral students and others also submitted questions. Over half of all registered participants (512) engaged in at least one OD-SP.

Preliminary Analysis

The analysis of the questions was conducted by the authors of this paper. Qualitative analysis procedures were applied for clustering them, and several iterations conducted for themes and subthemes to be identified (Charmaz, 2005). Some of the questions were reformulated by the research team to reflect a broader level of preoccupations or for clarity purposes. Ahead of the congress, the formulation of problems adopted a distance-relation process with participants' original submissions.

Onsite/online discussions/data collection

Barbara Rogoff kicked off the OD-SP activity. The subthemes resulting from the preliminary analysis were submitted to ISCAR 2017 delegates. A facilitator was attached to each group. Marlene Scardamalia joined in for the de-briefing session that took place toward the end of the congress. The artefacts resulting from the discussions at the congress provided further data (notes of cardboards or online, pictures) for 1) documentation of the participation process in OD-SP groups; 2) identification of the preoccupations of ISCAR 2017 participants; and 3) formulation of promising ideas at the theoretical and methodological levels. Some groups are continuing online their discussions.

Results

Table 1 presents the results. Themes and questions are supportive evidence of the preoccupations of participants:

Table 1: Themes and questions

Foundational concepts	
ZPD, learning and development	How should/might ontogenetic questions (child development) be articulated with the notion of learning within the ZPD? Revisiting our understanding of the "ZONE" in 2017 Learning design and assessment in the ZPD
Agency	In what ways various conceptualizations of agency (ex: relational or transformative) differ from one another? (cf.: Stetsenko (2005), "collectividual" to denote the individual within the collectivity) What are empirical indicators of transformative agency? What can be seen as indicators of transformative agency in formative interventionist research? What means, tools, and strategies can be used? What in a CL-process is especially critical concerning participants' agency?

Perezhivanie	What are Vygotsky's key ideas for a contemporary and holistic reflection on emotions?
Davydov's genetic model of a learning activity	Why is it important to capture the spirit of "learning activity" as articulated by Davydov during lesson planning? How do we ensure that subjects actively transform the object to be studied? Shall we 'decolonize' psychology from its non-holistic ways? What role do CHAT pedagogies play in the transformation of an education activity system?
The abstract and the concrete	What CHAT (Cultural-historical Activity Theory) approaches are productive to move from abstract ideas to concrete expansions of activity systems?
Participation in Communities	
Teacher participation in teaching and in research	From CHAT perspectives, in what ways teaching and research present potential for mutual expansion? In what way does participation in research community help foster teachers' transformative agency? What drives the need for teachers to engage in consequential participation in research? In what ways do tensions impact the consequential actions of participants? In what ways can CHAT help rethink and connect pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development?
Learning through participation in school	What formative interventions are needed to address tensions between school and non-school ways of learning, participation in in-school / out-of-school communities, and to examine boundaries between these communities? Research toward emancipatory responses in school to issues of inclusion, segregation, and exclusion (e.g.: children's exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes in conflicts in play) What is the nature of the relationship between participation, belonging, sharing and fitting in on the one hand, and individuality, creativity, performance and standing out on the other?
Participation in online spaces of learning	From CHAT perspectives, how does learning occur in various activities supported by collaborative digital platforms and devices (mobile tools, online communities, etc.) and how can it be scaffolded — e.g., learning mediated by tools / learning process through participation and reification? How are we experiencing digital devices as objects of learning that then become tools for productive activities? Which boundaries are crossed by ISCAR members when they actively participate in the ISLS/CSCL community? What are the boundaries constraining ISLS/CSLC members to actively participate in the ISCAR community? To what extent does belonging to ISCAR transforms one's participation in ISLS/CSCL and vice versa?
Participation in the face of "superdiversity"	What does "participation" mean in a "superdiverse community" consisting of a variety of ways of being, acting, and understanding? CHAT's promising ideas for rethinking and illuminating contemporary educational and social challenges Contradictions and negotiations within/between activity systems with diversity How can we conceptualize personal and social histories and how are dominant ideologies reproduced in and through interactions in activity systems?

Socio-political and economic exclusions as impediments to participation	What would a cultural activist practical stance look like that can work to alter (overcome)... the reproduction of inequities and injustice?

Discussion

The rich data base developed through this inquiry is an invitation for reflection, and we believe it will be useful to the learning sciences community to orient possible pathways for our future. The overarching themes of agency, moving from the abstract to the concrete, and the meaning of the ZPD (Foundational concepts and Methods) emerge from the first and third congress' subthemes: Foundations and INsights. Participation in communities gives a clear direction to the second subtheme of the congress, Practices. Though the congress devoted a full day to Foundations and INsights (theory and method), questions discussed revealed intervention-oriented rather than research-oriented preoccupations or ideas. We found almost no discussion regarding online collaborative platforms' affordances for reification and discourse analysis. This suggests that CSCL research results do not impact as much as they could the research and intervention practices of the ISCAR community.

References

Charmaz, K. (2005). Grounded theory in the 21st Century. Applications for Advancing Social Justice Studies. *In* N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research.* (Third edition ed., pp. 507-535). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

ISCAR (2017). Congress program. Available at http://www.iscar17.ulaval.ca

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Rogoff, B. (1995). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes: Participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. In J.V. Wertsch, P. del Rio, & A. Alvarez (Eds.), *Sociocultural studies of mind* (pp. 139-164). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Reprinted (2008) in K. Hall & P. Murphy (Eds.), *Pedagogy and practice: Culture and identities*. London: Sage.

Rogoff, B. (1997). Evaluating development in the process of participation: Theory, methods, and practice building on each other. In E. Amsel & A. Renninger (Eds.), *Change and development* (pp. 265-285). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (2003). Knowledge building. In *Encyclopedia of Education* (pp. 1370-1373). New York: Macmillan Reference.

Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (2014). Knowledge building and knowledge creation: Theory, pedagogy, and technology. In K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences (Second Edition)* (pp. 397-417)*.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgements