Apprentice, collaborator, colleague, competitor: negotiating the trajectory(ies) of a doctoral student: an activity theory perspective


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Abstract

This paper will conceptualise, via an 'Activity Theory' approach, the journey of a Doctor of Education (RHD) candidate from Masters student – through the coursework component of the EdD programme, and then onto a Doctor of Education Dissertation. In so doing it seeks to determine whether such an approach is able to 'capture' the subjective nature of such a journey. The RHD journey implicitly and explicitly involves membership of an academic community of practice and the author’s various experiences of this membership will provide the ‘dataset’ for this paper. Whilst drawing on earlier Activity Theory iterations, Engestrom’s (1987) 3rd Generation Activity Systems theory, will be primarily utilised to position myself in this system of practice. Drawing on the work of Stevenson (2004), the paper will explore how the elements of Rules and Division of Labour mediate the author’s doctoral experiences. Tensions and complexities (contradictions in Activity Theory terms) within the experience including the influence of social capital; relationships with supervisor(s); relationships with the wider Griffith University community; and access to publishing opportunities in academic journals are conceptualised as avenues for the author to transform himself as researcher and also transform the culture of his research community. The RHD journey, whilst clearly occurring within a specific research community, and defined to a significant extent by the contradictory elements of this community, is at the same time an intensely private experience and this reflection will consequently draw on my lived experience during various stages of the journey. The academic experience is a dynamic one in terms of the author’s various subjectivities – student, apprentice researcher, author, colleague, and competitor. As a way of framing these subjectivities, Membership Categorisation (Baker, 1997), will be used as a way of theorising the role of an active subject choosing from a range of available roles, and responding to a range of discourses within a particular context.

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- Historic - Faculty of Education

Date Deposited:
- 23 Mar 2012 03:03

Date Last Modified:
- 02 Jul 2013 23:59

Uncontrolled Keywords:
- activity theory; doctoral journey; research higher degree; doctoral degrees; supervisors

Fields of Research:
- 17 Psychology and Cognitive Sciences > 1701 Psychology > 170103 Educational Psychology
- 13 Education > 1301 Education Systems > 130103 Higher Education
- 22 Philosophy and Religious Studies > 2201 Applied Ethics > 220107 Professional Ethics (incl. police and research ethics)
- E Expanding Knowledge > 97 Expanding Knowledge > 970113 Expanding Knowledge in Education

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Apprentice, collaborator, colleague, competitor: Negotiating the trajectory(ies) of a doctoral student. In B. Garrick, S. Poed, & J. Skinner (Eds). Educational Planet Shapers: Researching, Hypothesising, Dreaming the Future. These have included the use of personal computers, mobile devices, the Internet, and Interactive Whiteboards (IWBs) to name a few. These changes also include the movement towards greater access by students to computers, including laptop computers aimed at providing 1:1 access. 1:1 access means that each student has individual access to a computer for the duration of a learning activity. This project investigated in what ways the provision of students' 1:1 access to computers translated to their classroom based usage. Perspectives on Activity Theory. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. Larkin, K. (2009). Apprentice, collaborator, colleague, competitor: Negotiating the trajectory(ies) of a doctoral student. In B. Garrick, S. Poed, & J. Skinner (Eds.), Educational Planet Shapers: Researching, hypothesising, dreaming the future. (pp. 51-66). Brisbane: PostPressed. Nardi, B. A. (1996). Some reflections on the Application of Activity Theory. In B. A. Nardi (Ed.), Context and Consciousness. Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction (3rd ed., pp. 235-246).