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Activity Theory Methodology to Frame Fieldwork in Higher Education Research

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Abstract

Locating a field for educational research requires careful application of ethnographic sensibilities and techniques. While conceptual and methodological frameworks can guide purposeful field mapping, combining methodologies is often critiqued. Nonetheless, activity theory researchers have long drawn on ethnographic methods to generate empirical data, particularly in preparing formative, interventionist Change Laboratory workshops in which practitioners are supported to transform their work practices. This paper foregrounds benefits and challenges of bringing ethnography and activity theory together to frame higher education research, illustrated through a case investigating university teaching practices within an Australian university. For research in one's own university workplace, at-home ethnography offers principles for working productively beyond the difficulties of familiarity, to determine appropriate field boundaries (e.g. faculty, department, community of practice, or other configurations) and to avoid overly broad, superficial accounts. The case centres upon digital teaching practices across several university disciplines. Multi-sited ethnography nuances this by accommodating postdigital university workplaces encompassing on-campus/off-campus and physical/digital sites. With a field spanning two campuses, face-to-face and online teaching spaces, multiple buildings and sites of practice, multi-sited ethnography enabled a design attentive to the richness of the field and to emergent traces of digital teaching practices by following the people and artefacts across contexts. Second-generation activity theory provided the analytical framework for identifying and following elements of the digital teaching activity system, including actors/subjects (discipline teachers), object, tools, community, rules, and division of labour. Third-generation activity theory extended analysis to boundary systems and enabled tracing historical, current, and prospective developments from multiple perspectives.

Keywords: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory; Ethnography; Digital Teaching; Multi-Sited; University Teachers