Contradictions and deviations from the traditional as sources of change in teacher education

Thuridur Johannsdottir
tjona@khi.is
Iceland University of Education

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Teacher Education in a distance learning programme in Iceland

- What possibilities does it bring for the potential development of the local schools where teacher students live and work that teacher students are moving between the university program and the local school?

- What possibilities does it bring for the potential development of the distance education programme that student teachers are participating in and moving between the distance programme and the local schools?
Context - data

- The lack of qualified teacher, esp. in rural Iceland
- In the school year 2004-2005 18 students living in the northern part of the West-fjord were enrolled in the distance learning programme of the Iceland University of Education and out of them 13 had job as teachers in the local primary schools.
- An ethnographical fieldwork in five compulsory schools by repeated visits during three years.
- Access to five on-line courses to analyse interaction of students and teachers as well as products of students’ learning as it is displayed on the course’s web, portfolios, discussion etc.
The study deals with

- whether the reframing of the distance education programme along activity theoretical conception can enhance our understanding of this model for distance learning
- and how it could be a basis on which to investigate and develop distance teacher education and teacher education in general in response to changing needs in an ever changing society.
- Learning that leads to development of individuals and the activity systems in which they participate are under consideration.
The idea of partnership

- Within cultural historical activity theory the shortcoming of both the mainstream cognitive science approach and the situated learning model is claimed to be their vertical view of knowledge and expertise.

- It is suggested that a horizontal view also has to be taken into account. Learning that leads to development of individuals and the activity systems in which they participate are under consideration.

- Expansive learning refers to processes in which an activity system, for example a work organization, resolves its pressing internal contradictions by constructing and implementing a qualitatively new way of functioning for itself (Engeström 2007, p. 24).
Primary contradictions

- *(the most important arising within the object of activity) are explained by inner conflict between use value and exchange value.*
- *has been identified as the discrepancy between the ideal type of work and the reality in practice*

- Contradictions between serving the local schools by well educated teachers and graduating as many as possible, e.g. showing efficacy

- Within the local schools the disturbances are partly caused by the definition of the object

- The experience of the double bind situation as both student teachers and teachers, dealing with contradictions in different roles, where responsibility for children’s welfare and development is stressed in both systems, could be a key to development in schools as well as teacher education
Ideal form enhanced:
Responsibility for children’s welfare and development

Elisabet, enrolled in the first cohort (starting 1993), explains the importance of the distance programme for the local school:

- The school ethos changed…. As an example in the staff-room we stopped talking about Jacob being boring and difficult just like his grandmother used to be and started to talk about what we could do to make Jacob feel better and how we could organize the teaching so that slower pupils could manage the learning tasks.
Secondary contradictions

- arise between the elements of activity, e.g. between new object or new tools and old rules or division of labour.
- When new elements are presented into an activity system from the outside, (e.g. new technology) contradictions arise e.g. regarding rules that have to be changed.

- Contradictions between traditional rules of schooling, e.g. rules of communication between teachers and students and between peer students, and the object of activity that shall be performed online.

- As control tends to be looser in distance education, students attain agency to react to this situation by forming acceptable rules for legitimate communication and collaboration online.

- This is supported by rules and division of labour which stress communication and collaboration that in turn can serve as a boundary object between the on-campus sessions and online sessions.

- The boundary object can be transformed into an ideal form of practice and negotiated to be a shared object enhancing developmental transfer.
Secondary contradictions: new tools call for different rules of communication

Lilith says:

- It takes the first year to learn how to communicate on the WebCT.
- We just have to take it as evident that we are all learning here, we are putting forwards our opinions but … yes we need to mind how we say things.

- And this is very much in the discussion and that is why during the first year we need to meet. This one may be said that and you meet him or her and she says; I did not mean it that way you know.

- And the teacher meets some of the students who has been so aggressive on the WebCT. Then the person turns out to be very likeable and sweet.

- So you see the first year you are learning to communicate, because the way to communicate on-line this way is so new to most of us.

- […] and then when we enter the second year and then the WebCT has become so strong – and the discussions there. (jan 2006:14)
Tertiary contradictions

- Tertiary contradictions appear between a culturally more advanced form of the activity in question and the dominant or older form of activity. Solving these contradictions might result in development of new activity that are “…put into practice and experimented with”

- There are teachers who patronize student teachers when addressing them and I think that is unacceptable but that happens every now and then. Students ask about something that the teachers have perhaps said before and then he answers like the student is an idiot.
Expanding the object of activity

Sara:

- Last year you see it was quite clear how we should perform on the learning tasks but all the same we had a free choice but clear guidelines.
- And then this year it was remarkable how she was not nearly as clear.
- I thought it was really difficult because I did not know what she wanted us to do.
- But at the same time I thought: Why is it bothering me, I should be doing this for me and not for her?

- she is “in a situation that require personal engagement in actions with material objects and artefacts (including other human beings) that follow the logic of an anticipated or designed future model of the activity” (Engeström, 2007a).
Quaternary contradictions

- *emerge between the central activity and its interacting neighbouring activity system.*

Head teacher:
- Repeatedly we are losing the teachers during the most important time of the school year, when it is starting in August. Then we are planning and preparing, receiving new pupils and getting a grip of the situation.

There are courses to prepare the inner work of the school, procedures, etc. which are very important, not to mention especially for new teachers.

And we are losing them year after year during theses days, which is very inconvenient.
Theoretical underpinning for school-university partnership

- Cultural historical activity theory prompts us to look at contradictions and deviations from the traditional practice as sources of change.

- The form for teacher education under study (distance learning) may be looked upon as a deviant from traditional teacher education.

- My claim is that using activity theory in analyzing learning and development in the distance programme opens up an understanding of the teacher education in general.
Expansive learning in co-configuration

- It is *transformative* learning that radically broadens the shared object.

- It is learning by *experiencing*.

- It is *horizontal* and dialogical learning.

- It is *subterranean* learning that blazes cognitive trails that are embodied and lived but unnoticeable.

Engeström 2007
Expanded objects

- learning by **experiencing**, coping with real situations and working out solutions to overcome difficulties and disturbances.

- The distance students’ mode of collaboration and forming networks seem to be appropriate for sustaining a future oriented form for work and they have a lived understanding of the future form of working which seems to be emerging.

- Next step: coconfiguration work where a future model of the activity would guide the practice towards an ideal form

- My analysis are supposed to inform explicit developmental work aiming at inter-organizational learning and work.