

Chapter 93

Interventions for Learning at Global Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the need for rethinking cultural differences when designing and implementing learning interventions at global workplaces. Selected concepts of cultural-historical activity theory and anthropological and philosophical studies of globalization are included. Empirical data from a learning intervention directed towards a globally distributed design engineering project is analyzed. The purpose is to find intermediate concepts weaving together abstractions of culture and development with immediate observations of cultural differences. Conclusions drawn from intermediate notions imply that spontaneous presumptions about cultural differences and the developmental potential of an activity may distance the actors in global units from the object of collaborative production. Participants may become alienated from their true motive for working. In the design of future learning interventions in globalizing work, sociocultural embeddedness and universality of human activity make up the challenging starting points.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding cultural differences is important in a global world, but the way researchers approach such differences needs to be reconsidered. Several decades back cultural psychologists and anthropologists argued against “the deficit hypothesis” (Cole & Bruner, 1971). This hypothesis referred to the assumption that a community under conditions of poverty, typically among minority ethnic groups, is a disorganized community, which expresses itself in various forms of deficit regarding parental attention and school performance. In

contrast, stated Cole and Bruner (*ibid.*, p. 874), attention should be directed towards “the range of capacities readily manifested in different groups and then to inquire whether the range is adequate to the individual’s needs in various cultural settings”. Cultural *difference* rather than deprivation is at stake when an individual faces demands to perform in a manner which is inconsistent with past cultural experiences, summarize Cole and Bruner (*ibid.*).

In the past decades, cultural differences and cultural diversity were mainly discussed in the context of inequality in multi-cultural societies.

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In the age of globalization, the differences that people face at multicultural workplaces have increased. Due to the mobility and distribution of work, defining cultural difference in terms of group membership seems inadequate and far too general. Still, nation-based characteristics dominate the extant business management literature (Hofstede, 1984; Deresky, 2011; Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2011). Furthermore, such an approach appeals to a practitioner's mind as an obvious explanation of cross-cultural issues. Understanding national characteristics may prove to be helpful in everyday encounters, but does such an understanding of differences enhance learning?

In order to develop learning interventions in global work practices, researchers should begin by going beyond the obvious focus on national characteristics. The cultural-historical activity theory represents a productive critical approach suited to tackling cultural issues involved in workplace learning. For an activity-theorist researcher, a promising way to go beyond obvious assumptions is to follow a concrete societal activity in transformation. The findings of a reported pilot project implementing global design engineering in a Finnish international company will be used to carry the storyline of this presentation.

This chapter reflects on the possibilities of extending learning interventions developed in and for local- and nation-based contexts to global cross-cultural workplaces. I address my main concerns of understanding cultural difference, development, and learning needs in global work. I do so by combining and discussing analytical activity-theoretical and anthropological concepts. The combination of interpretative resources links my analysis to the long tradition of cultural-historical activity theory research, which has substantially drawn from anthropological methods and approaches for investigating human communities (Engeström & Middleton, 1996; Yanow, 2000).

A general understanding of cultural differences in terms of space and location will first be problematized in the light of literature and empirical

findings. Secondly, I provide some empirical evidence on the meaning of global and globalizing work practices for those employees who have to manage cultural difference in distributed work. Thirdly, I discuss the possibilities of global workplace learning interventions and present data from a concrete case. In the experiment reported, the purpose of the cross-cultural learning intervention was to expand the given perspective on cultural difference by directing attention to the shared object of activity. The previous literature and the empirical findings from the author's research case will alternate throughout the chapter. After a discussion of the future research directions, the chapter closes with a summary of the findings and the conceptual perspectives offered by cultural-historical activity theory as a tool for dealing with cultural differences during workplace learning.

DENATURALIZING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992, p.7), note that “the fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands”. They are migrant workers, nomads, members of the transnational business and professional elite. Other people cross national-cultural borders more or less permanently. They are immigrants, refugees, exiles and expatriates. Gupta and Ferguson problematize the relationship between physical space and culture. They challenge two naturalisms, the ethnological habit of taking the association of a culturally unitary group and “its” territory as natural, and the national habit of taking the association of citizens of states and their territories as natural (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 11). Anthropologists need to question a pre-given world of separate and discrete “peoples and cultures,” and see instead a difference-producing set of relations in historical process (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 16). The au-

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