

Chapter 35

Cross–Analysis of the Activity Systems of Higher Education International Students in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of a cross-analysis of the seven portraits of the activity systems of higher education international students in online learning. The cross-analysis relies on Activity Theory as a tool to identify and sort patterns in the data, in this instance across seven portraits. The cross-analysis aggregates findings from across all seven portraits into the Activity Theory components of subject, object, tools, norms, community, division of labour, and outcomes. The chapter provides an aggregate portrait of the activity system of the seven students.

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, we featured the portraits of the activity systems of seven higher education international students in online learning. In this chapter, we present the results of a cross-analysis of the portraits. The purpose of the cross-analysis is to make sense of the phenomenon of higher education international students in online learning. To support the sense-making process, we rely on Activity Theory. Activity Theory acts as a tool to help identify and sort patterns in the data, in this instance, across seven portraits. In other words, Activity Theory helps narrow the focus to make it easier to identify what is important and related across the portraits.

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The outcome of the cross-analysis is not intended for use as a generalized claim to make predictions about other contexts of international students in online learning in other higher education institutions. The outcome will represent an instance of a phenomenon, in one context. Those attempting to make sense in their context may consider the instance described in this book and compare it to their own to help further understand their context.

The cross-analysis presented in this chapter is not the final stage of the sense-making process. This chapter ends with an aggregate portrait of the activity system of the seven students. In Chapter 10, we analyze that aggregate portrait to identify contradictions and opportunities for expansive transformation of the activity system. That process will be relevant for others interested in conducting their own Activity Theory analyses of technology in higher education.

The following sections correspond to the seven components of: subject, object, tools, norms, community, division of labour, and outcomes. Each component aggregates the units of data from all seven student portraits. The chapter provides an aggregate portrait of the activity system of the international higher education students in online learning in our study.

SUBJECT

The participants represented various sociocultural origins, disciplines, and personality traits. They are not representative of the wider variety that exists and that might have been portrayed if we had drawn on a broader sample. At the same time, the seven portraits provide insights into some of the different types of origins, disciplines, and traits. Beyond the aggregated portrait of the subjects themselves is how those traits, origins, and disciplines relate to other components in the activity system. For example, how is being shy relevant to learning in a context where the norm is text-based interaction and there is no voice or visual interaction?

One noticeable common characteristic is that all participants were relatively comfortable using computers and the Internet. Their portraits revealed that they regularly relied on computers and the Internet for communicating and accessing information. Albert and John were enrolled in a Bachelor of Technology program and John was a web developer and online video game player. Khalid and Rajesh were long-time Internet users. Rajesh, Albert, Ariene, and Vincent were experienced users. Dina had previously relied on the Internet for information searching. Their experience varied in relation to the number of online courses that they had taken. Ariene was the most experienced with 10 courses and Albert, John, and Vincent, with six, five, and four respectively, while Dina had only taken one online course at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Khalid and Rajesh two each.

In terms of their proficiency with the English language, there was variation in the types of skills with which they were most comfortable and in which they were most proficient. All participants described themselves as relatively proficient in English yet all experienced weaknesses with some aspect of the language. Rajesh, Dina, and Albert had difficulty with writing. Rajesh was not good at reading whereas Ariene, Vincent, and John described themselves as proficient in reading. Whereas Albert could speak without hesitation, Dina felt she was not as good at speaking.

In terms of personality traits, except for Khalid, who described himself as friendly and sociable and Dina, who was talkative, the others were either shy or not talkative, at least not in on-campus courses. They did not indicate if they were shy in their own country or if their shyness was only a result of being an international student in unfamiliar linguistic and cultural surroundings. All characterized themselves

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