Activity Theory

Engeström (2001): *Expansive Learning at Work: toward an activity theoretical…*

**Activity Theory (AT):**
- Cooperation as activity
- Human activity is mediated by culture and technology (tools)

*AT had its offspring in the former Soviet Union as part of the cultural-historical school of psychology founded by Vygotskij, Leontjev and Lurija. AT has influenced western scholarly thinking (especially through work of Engeström and Cole). AT is applied in IS research – seen as resourceful analytical tool that puts focus on the interplay between subjects, tools, objects + outcome (Bardram 1997).
*AT is a rich approach for understanding how human consciousness and activity are socially constructed (how they are part of and deeply bound with everyday practice) (Kaptelinin & Nardi).
*AT emphasizes the importance of looking at humans, tools, rules etc. not as isolated entities, but, rather, to look at and understand the connection between (the “collective” of the) cultural and technical mediation of human activity (Engeström 2000).

**Human activity:**
- Directed towards a material or idea object, which is
- Mediated by artifacts (tools, language etc.), which is
- Social within a culture (Bardram 1997)

Engeström delineates the history of AT from a 1st to a 3rd generation. In its current, Engeström state, AT may be summarized with help of five principles:

1) A collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system – within its relations to/with other activity systems – is taken to the core of analysis.
2) Multi-voicedness. An activity system is always a community of multiple points of views, traditions and interests.
3) Historicity. Activity systems take shape and get transformed over periods of time.
4) Contradictions (not the same as problems or conflicts) are sources of change and development.
5) Transformation. Activity systems move through long cycles of transformations

But what is meant by the concept **expansive learning**?

**Discussion** about CSCW and AT (and other theories -> what is a theory, what does it bring about, what should we bring to mind when seeing the world through a theory?)

**DISCUSSION + work in groups:**
1) Think about the ethnography-article we read last week ("Seeing Ethnographically") and try to locate and insert objects, subjects, tools, etc. into the AT-triangle (see e.g. p. 145 in Engeström’s text):

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*“by shifting theoretical perspective the world under investigation also changes shape” (O’Brien 1993:10-11, quoted in Silverman 2005:96).*