A Practical In-Class Demonstration of Activity Theory

2018 ABC My Favorite Assignment
Adam Lloyd, Ph.D. – University of Maryland
lloyda@umd.edu

Background:
Activity Theory teaches students to analyze and to better adapt to any workplace organization's operations by providing a holistic view of the organization's activity and how all the various subjects, roles, tools (**including communication genres**), and values contribute to forming and carrying out the organization's objectives.

Students are already familiar with Yrjö Engström's activity system model and have read several articles on activity theory, including Clay Spinuzzi's, "How Can Technical Communicators Study Work Contexts?," which describes the differences between two separate activity systems engaged in the same activity. At this point in the semester, we are also just beginning to study genres as social action. This activity combines these two areas of study.

Supplies:
- 6 business related artifacts, each representing a distinct genre (e.g. *The Wall Street Journal*, Apple's annual "Environmental Responsibility Report," *Forbes Magazine*, *BPCQ* Journal, Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, Amazon Quarterly Report)
- 1 pad of Post-it notes for each student in the class

Preparation:
- Divide students into 6 groups
- Give each group a single artifact to analyze
- Give every student 1 pad of Post-it notes

Instructions:
- Students will be asked 7 genre-related questions, one at a time
- Groups have 3 minutes to write down as many answers as they can to each question; **only** one answer per Post-it note
- Groups are to select an area of the classroom wall and will post their answers there before the next question is asked
  - Questions:
    - Identify as many genre categories as you can to which your artifact belongs.
    - What are the formal characteristics of the genre?
    - What is the scene, setting, and rhetorical situation that gave rise to this artifact's creation?
    - What is the genre's purpose (the social action it is intended to enact)?
    - Who are the members of the community that interact with (create and consume) this artifact?
    - What does the artifact/genre reveal about the community's relationships, hierarchies, values, beliefs, and objectives?
    - With what other artifacts and genres does this artifact/genre interact (respond to, anticipate)?

- After all 7 questions have been asked and answered, have the students look around the room at the different arrangements of Post-it notes and point out that 6 distinct activity systems have taken form over the course of this session
- Ask each group, one-by-one, to describe how their group's activity system took shape and operated:
    - What was the division of labor (who did what)?
    - What were the rules that governed their activity (the organization of the Post-it notes)?
    - What tools did each of them use to engage in the activity (physical location within the room, pens, cell phones)?
    - How did each of these elements affect the objective and outcome of the activity?
- Only then, turn to a discussion about their answers to the genre-related questions and how genres enact, form, and reflect a community's social activities.

Outcomes:
Typically, groups form very different dynamics and have different divisions of labor, rules, and tools that alter how each group worked together and the results of their activity. In some groups everyone writes answers and everyone posts their own notes on the wall; in some, one person ends up writing, another researches the artifact, and another puts the Post-it notes on the wall. In some cases, student's pens have run out, so they took on the posting responsibility or, in other cases, the student closest to the wall was responsible for the job of posting. Groups sitting close to a wall tend to post their notes as they are written while groups in the center of the room typically collect all of their Post-it notes for a question and carry them all at once to their spot on the wall.

In some groups there was significant discussion so that their answers did not overlap; in others, everyone worked individually and ended up with a lot of redundancy in their answers. Several groups decided to order their Post-it notes by question, some further organized these answers from broad to specific within each question, and some of the groups simply stuck their answers up haphazardly which made later discussion of their answers to each question more difficult since timely retrieval of those answers proved problematic.

By participating in this exercise, however, all of the students quickly recognize how different interpersonal dynamics, divisions of labor, material tools and physical space, and the rules and norms used to govern the group's work all have profound effects on the processes and outcomes of that activity.

They also gain insight into the ways that genre both forms and reflects the values, objectives, and activities of a particular community; the scenes and situations in which genre artifacts arise and operate; the characteristics that define particular genres as well as ways in which particular artifacts can stretch a genre or encourage it to evolve; and the ways that genres and artifacts interact with other genres and artifacts.