

Intercultural Knowledge Building: The Literate Action of a Community Think Tank

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Abstract

Intercultural rhetoric is the study of literate practices that use cultural difference to build knowledge and support wise action. This paper documents the practice of a community think tank on urban workforce issues and examines the strategies used in this dialogue to 1) design an intercultural forum, 2) structure inquiry within diversity, and 3) build intercultural knowledge. It asks, can such literate action produce significant, transformative knowledge?

The study draws on conceptual tools of activity theory and social cognitive rhetoric to explore the conflicts built into this process and the mediating role of documentation. It argues that two important outcomes of intercultural inquiry are its ability 1) to construct a richly situated representation of workforce issues--as a social and cognitive activity, and 2) to build a guide for action that emerges not solely from the arguments of causal logic, but from culturally negotiated "working theories," attuned to multiple realities and possible outcomes.

Embracing Representational Conflict: A Problem for Knowledge Builders

One of the enduring difficulties of building new knowledge is the need to seek difference, to tolerate dissonance, and to embrace the generative possibilities of conflicting ideas and competing realities within the process of inquiry (Young, Becker, Pike, 1970). Ordinary people and professionals alike are drawn into inquiry and the need for knowledge building when they want to understand and solve complex problems. In research, business and government, knowledge building often becomes a relatively public process as people try to interpret data, restructure their schools, improve a company's quality control, or shape social policy. In such a process, wisdom tells them to invite diverse perspectives to their table. But as they inevitably discover, when real diversity enters the room, conflicting representations of reality sit down at the table.

The conflict among these representations is a tangled web: the counter-productive aspects of conflict (e.g., misunderstanding, competition and anxiety) may co-exist with the generative potential of difference (e.g., with the possibility of alternative perspectives, rival hypotheses, competing conceptualizations, and an expanded vision of values and priorities). Studies of knowledge building document the advantages of embracing difference and taking the provisional stance of inquiry in widely different settings—in democratic classrooms (Trimbur, 1989), in corporations attempting to become "learning organizations" (Senge, 1990), in professional

design teams (Burnett, 1991), on the shop floors of high-performance workplaces (Gee, Hull, Lankshear, 1996), or in federal inquiries into industrial disasters (Sauer, in press). But this is no easy stance to take; people must overcome considerable barriers, starting with established social practices that rush to hush awkward dissonance. They must resist deep-running cognitive processes and learned interpretive schemas that assimilate and nullify difference. And they must invoke literate practices of inquiry—from a Socratic dialogue to the scientific method—that invite and shelter the particular kinds of divergent thinking they value. In short, the real challenge of knowledge building is to embrace, not just tolerate, conflict.

Intercultural rhetoric places itself at a crossroads of difference with a history of conflict. It asks, what happens to discourse and interpretation at the borders and boundaries of cultural difference—within those “contact zones” where differences of race, class, ethnicity, discipline and discourse meet? And because rhetoric is an art of both discovery and change, an intercultural rhetoric must combine inquiry with literate action. It asks, how might I communicate and construct knowledge across these differences?



This chapter is about the process of knowledge building in an intercultural forum. It explores the distinctive rhetoric of a community think tank on urban concerns that deliberately sought to embrace racial, cultural, class and discourse differences. Seating urban employees and community workers at the table with business managers, social agency staff, and policy makers, this forum asked them to go beyond *presenting* their perspectives to *collaboratively constructing* more workable policies and operational action plans.

The obvious question here is whether such a rhetorical situation can produce *significant, transformative knowledge*? Can it rewrite prior private and public representations, change minds, provoke action, or reshape social interactions? And if it could, what forms might this knowledge take?

Woven throughout this discussion is a parallel inquiry into activity theory. Or perhaps I should call it a test drive of this conceptual engine, for I would like to demonstrate the methodological power activity theory can bring to the problem of intercultural dialogue. And conversely, I will suggest that the portrait of “working theories,” which we observe at the end of this study, may offer a new way activity theory can account for the bridge between individual and social action.

Following an introduction to the conceptual tools I will be using and to our community case study, this chapter has three sections. The first (Designing an Intercultural Forum) looks at the context for community discussion and the built-in conflicts one needs to anticipate in initiating

such a dialogue.¹ The second section (Structuring a Dialogue to Use Difference) examines the design of a “community problem-solving dialogue.” It treats this particular literate practice as a working hypothesis—as an attempt to answer the question: How *do* you support knowledge building in the midst of such conflict? The final section, (Building New Knowledge) considers some alternative ways to evaluate the outcome of these dialogues and the knowledge they construct.

A Word about Method: Why Analyze Intercultural Knowledge Building as a Social/Cognitive Activity?

The problem here is how do you develop an explanatory account of a social/cognitive event? The activity we are trying to understand is essentially social (an historically shaped collaborative and literate practice). But it is also an effort to privilege individual cognition, personal representations, and productive differences. And to further complicate the story, it then tries to translate this individual knowing back into social change. The standard conceptual tools of both cognitive and cultural theory are better at dichotomizing these forces than they are at helping us get at the *interaction* of cognition, social processes, and worldly action that is at the heart of intercultural dialogue.

So in trying to follow the tracks of productive cultural difference, I start with a premise of American philosophical pragmatism that echoes William James: For a difference to be a difference, it must make a difference (James, 1967). In other words, the meaning of intercultural inquiry (however we define or theorize it) ultimately lies not in rational theorizing, but in the consequences of acting on our understanding of this notion (Dewey, 1988). We must therefore track its meaning in the literate, social, material practices in which knowledge building exists as an *activity*.

A notion of human activity *as a highly mediated social and cognitive process* has been emerging within the work of activity theory (Wertsch, 1991). Rooted in the 1920-30's Soviet philosophy, psychology, and politics of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, this notion is an effort to transcend the dualisms of the individual self and its social, material circumstances, of mind and behavior (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Like Dewey (1988), writing against rational dualisms in 1928, these thinkers felt the answer lay in activity, in human action. Or, as Yeats evokes this insight (in his 1928 poetic vision of embodied learning): “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” But the problem this posed for Vygotsky the researcher was finding a meaningful unit of analysis. In his search for an analytic object that was simultaneously a unit of mind and social activity, or of consciousness and behavior, he rejected units such as the “concept” or “language” in favor of his notion of “word meaning” to stress that a unit of thinking is also one of communication. He found his focus in the analysis of goal-oriented action (Minick, 1997, p 124).

Activity Analysis

In the last decade, this strand of activity *theory* (and it is are a diverse set) has transformed its theorizing into the robust practice of activity *analysis*, for studying the nature of learning and

knowledge making (Bazerman, 1997; Engeström, 1993; Lave, 1993; Prior, 1998; Wertsch, 1991). These researchers entered their fields the bold argument that the unit of analysis in such inquiry must be an entire activity and its activity system. In Engeström's (1993) powerful model this includes not only the actors, the object of action, and the community which shares those objects, but also divisions of labor or power, the rules and conventions, and the material or symbolic tools that mediate the activity.

For our purposes here, activity analysis makes three strong claims that shift our analysis from a traditional focus on texts, contexts, or cognition alone, to a focus on the larger "situated activity" and the system in which it may operate (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993).

- 1) The process of knowledge building is situated in a cognitive, social, historical and material activity, where multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory elements, viewpoints, and "voices" are in play, each giving meaning and shape to the activity.
- 2) These points of conflict and contradiction within the activity are important as places where learning and change can occur.
- 3) Mediational tools (from concepts, to literate practices, to technology) shape activities, and these tools are in fact one way individual actions alter broader social structures.

For instance, many current workforce development programs in urban centers are motivated by Washington's welfare policy of "work first" (with the possibility of training and support later). The tools which measure program success focus on the number of job *placements*—not retention. This stands in contradiction to the employers' need to achieve workplace *success*, at a low investment in training and support, which in turn fails to mesh with the employees' need to manage the linked burden of workplace and worklife *problems* (from affordable childcare to the pervasive effects of unemployment). An activity perspective on workforce issues, then, might start with contradictions like these in social programs and community supports and the tools that measure success. In this paper, an activity perspective lets us bring the same analytical tools to intercultural dialogue itself as an activity, looking at the context and contradictions of collaborative problem posing, at the competing discourses that rise to take the floor, at the literate tools that mediate this dialogue, and at the outcomes of a social process designed to embrace conflict.

In Engeström's probing arguments, one of the central dilemmas troubling (and motivating) activity theory is how to bridge self and society, individualism and structuralism in more productive ways (1998; 1999a). Most work motivated by activity theory tends to focus on social, cultural, and historical dimensions of an activity as a social system.² However, I will argue, a fully realized activity analysis must also include the activity of individual meaning makers, people operating, in Wertsch's words, as "agents-acting-with-mediated-means" (1991, p. 12). And when the activity in question is *intercultural* knowledge building, Engeström's bridge will need to show how the highly diverse representations and acts of individual rhetors, on one side, might lead to new socially constructed knowledge and action on the other.

Negotiation Analysis

It is here that the methods of social cognitive rhetoric can often give us a finer grained analysis of meaning making, by tracking the construction of negotiated meanings within an activity. The theory of negotiated meaning making offered here comes out of my work with college students, urban youth and community members, observed in acts of writing and collaborative inquiry (Flower, 1994; Flower, Long, Higgins, 2000, Flower & Deems, 2002). Exploring these intercultural dialogues will show how, in this more public context, negotiation analysis can deepen our insight into situated knowledge making, and how it may also reveal important openings for agency within social systems. Negotiation analysis works on the following premises:

- 1) Acts of writing (and deliberation) give us access to a constructive process that is itself the site of energetic conflict between multiple “voices” or kinds of knowledge that would shape the representation of meaning (just as they shape activities). We know that when individual meaning makers are engaged in crafting a text or a conversation, these voices—these shaping forces—take many forms. They include not only the live voices of teachers, editors, and conversational partners, but the internal voices of personal intention, knowledge and emotion, and the internalized dictates of convention, language, and ideology.
- 2) When writers turn attention (at some level) to such conflicts, they enter into the construction of a *negotiated* meaning, the attempt to interpret and manage conflicting voices results in provisional resolutions and—at times—in restructured understanding. Tracking this negotiation and its conflicts can reveal which voices within a broad social and cultural activity have risen to the status of “live” options and come under negotiation. And it can often reveal the hidden logic that may be on the one hand derailing learning, degrading performance, and thwarting communication—and on the other producing new knowledge. (Cf. Flower, 1994, p36-84).

Activity analysis draws us to consider what Engeström (1993) calls “contradictions” in the activity system itself—within its rules and norms, within its mediating tools, and within the way effort and status are assigned. Adding a rhetorical analysis shifts our focus from the system *per se*—its structure and contradictions—to the actions of meaning-making individuals and groups within that activity dealing with the conflicts that matter to them (on both an intra- and an interpersonal level).

For instance, we see a local African American union leader thinking his way to a better vision of workplace mentoring for new “at-risk” employees. He is in a dialogue, listening to the mentoring procedure proposed by the human resource officer across the table. We see him trying to accommodate the “management solution” with his personal knowledge of the competitive politics of a racist work environment (and the internal voice that says, “You can’t trust the system”). Meanwhile the voice of racial solidarity in his own head is calling for supportive action of co-workers -- even as his work ethic never fails to add, “Yes, but nobody’s going to do it for you.”

Negotiation analysis takes us this next step deeper into the dynamics of a knowledge-making activity by asking: How do diverse participants in an activity actually represent these conflicts to themselves and to others. What “voices” are privileged in their differing representations? And what happens when these people rise to individually and collaboratively *negotiated* meaning making in response to competing representations?

Goals of the Research

My own position in this inquiry is an interested one. As a co-developer of the series of community/university collaborations sketched below I participate in these activities as theorizer and educator, as meeting facilitator and scribe, as data collector, analyst, and public activist. Methodologically, this analysis does not pretend to the “objective” status of disinterested research offering generalizable assertions. It is motivated in part by a desire to document the Community Think Tank as a work in progress, and in part by a desire to build an observation-based theory of such knowledge building. And in doing so I hope to make a case to other scholars for linking rhetoric, intercultural collaboration, and community action.

However, I think it might be even more methodologically revealing to locate this essay within the activity it attempts to document. In one sense it is a chapter in an on-going discussion of community literacy (cf. Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Goldblatt, 1994; Peck, Flower & Higgins, 1995; Flower, 1996; Higgins, 1996; Flower, 1998; Cushman, 1999; Deans, 2000; Flower, Long, Higgins, 2000; Flower & Heath, 2000; Long, 2000; Swan, 2002; Long, Peck, & Baskins, in press; Hull & Schultz, in press; Flower, in prep; Higgins, in prep). In another sense, writing this essay is a “chapter”—an event—in the history and social practice of community literacy itself, a step in the development of its literate practices, of its community networks, and its consequences. Writing this account draws on the intellectual tools of activity analysis in part because they can give structure and theoretical rigor to the analysis. More importantly, these tools help me focus on what seems to be the heart of the matter—on the diverse voices, inevitable contradictions, and possible tools that shape intercultural knowledge-building. Within the context then of doing community literacy, writing studies like this is a necessary part of praxis—it links action with reflection that is grounded in data and mediated by strong methodological tools. Such analysis is part of what Dewey would call “an experimental way of knowing” —documenting an activity not to “prove” a claim about it, but to understand it more fully as your working hypothesis, to probe its problems, to more fully envision its possibilities, and in doing so to inevitably reshape your working theory and next actions.

The Community Think Tank: A Case Study of Knowledge Building:

The Community Think Tank started as an initiative of the Carnegie Mellon Center for University Outreach. Operating as a series of structured, community problem-solving dialogues focused on a given urban problem, the Think Tank called together an intercultural body of problem solvers. It invited everyday people, grassroots leaders, and professionals from Pittsburgh’s inner city community, from business, regional development, social service, and education to seek workable

options for dealing with some shared problems. The Think Tank's round tables deliberately reorganized normal patterns of communication and authority—for in these dialogues, the contribution of the inner city youth worker was as critical at the perspective of a CEO. And unlike many community/university projects, the participants (not the University) were positioned as the experts and knowledge makers. Our expertise lay in inquiry, in our ability to elicit and document the intercultural knowledge building of this diverse group. The Center for University Outreach also used the Think Tank to mount its public argument to business, foundations, social service agencies, community organizations—and the university itself—that intercultural inquiry was a significant, but significantly underused tool for addressing the really pressing problems affecting our economy and urban community.³


The Community Think Tank began in 1999 as a series of inquiries into the struggles of urban employees. But it is important to locate its approach in the earlier social and literate history of Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center (CLC), a community/university collaboration that supported a distinctive mix of street-wise and research-based literate action (see Peck et. al., 1995). Motivated by the varied vigorous agendas of community engagement, black struggle, educational research, spiritual life projects, and program development, this collaboration redirected both partners. It led to a new public identity and education-based mission for the Community House and Community House Church, and it had shaped a new community-based research agenda within a federally supported academic research center, the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Berkeley and Carnegie Mellon.

For over a decade the Community Literacy Center had been holding public dialogues on topics such as "Risk and Respect" and "Raising the Curtain on Curfew" led by urban teens at the culmination of 12-week literacy projects. These dialogues and the teen-authored documents that supported them recognized the expert, inside knowledge teens had about gangs, police, urban schools, and jobs. The CLC projects supported that expertise with explicit instruction—helping urban teenagers develop the literate skills they needed to engage in focused problem analysis and civil, persuasive discourse. Out of this mix of education and social action the "community problem-solving dialogue" had emerged as a strategy for structured, intercultural dialogue.⁴

The Community Think Tank team⁵ turned this strategy to a new purpose, bringing business, policy, and neighborhood "experts" together into a more sustained and interactive dialogue on timely urban problems. In Pittsburgh, a steel town trying to rethink itself into a high-tech development center, one of these problems was the ongoing struggle to prepare a new urban workforce. The wise officer of a foundation that supported the project's start-up had told us, "We already know the problem; we have lots of academic analyses. You say you care about change; then focus your energy there—on what to do." So the Think Tank identified itself with the task of constructing not only negotiated meanings but building and questioning options for action.

CARNegie MELLON

Community ThinkTank



Intercultural Problem-Solving
for Performance
in WorkPlaces and WorkLives

BRIEF 1 | FALL 2000

The Carnegie Mellon COMMUNITY THINK TANK creates an intercultural body of problem solvers – from Pittsburgh's urban community, business, regional development, social service, and education – to find workable solutions to Workplace, Worklife problems. BRIEF 1 explores points of consensus emerging from the THINK TANK process.

URBAN EMPLOYEES IN THE NEW WORKPLACE

Intercultural Decision Making Affects Retention and Performance

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or Pittsburgh employers, the new urban workforce challenges old approaches to recruitment, retention, and performance. Meanwhile, inexperienced employees are struggling to negotiate this culture of work amid the constraints of poverty. Workforce development appears inextricably tied to a capacity for interculturally informed decision making – by both groups.

The Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank brings the tools of intercultural problem solving to issues of work, youth, and community development.


Its structured dialogue uses both cultural diversity and the alternative perspectives of employers, employees, and the community to identify real workplace problems and to explore and test solutions.

THE THINK TANK IDENTIFIES TWO AREAS FOR ACTION

The Think Tank's findings over the last twelve months are pointing to two critical factors that affect workplace performance and retention:

1 Intercultural Problem-Solving Do management/staff teams have the capacity for intercultural problem-solving? Are they tapping the expertise of bottom-tier workers in decisions that affect the performance of the workplace?

2 Capacity-Building Tools for Local Decision Making Do new employees have a developed capacity for work-based decision making? Are business and community support services anchoring their training to a parallel development of this core capacity that links work, decisions, and personal growth?



I think this employee's reading of the situation would come as a big surprise to some managers.

The project's first publication, called the *Think TankBrief*, was a 4-page newsletter, focused on "Urban Employees in the New Workplace. It introduced the Think Tank process and philosophy, arguing for the need for intercultural problem solving. A side bar from the *Brief*, reproduced in Figure 1, named three features that define the Think Tank's knowledge-building strategy. They also suggest places where generative conflict is likely to occur.

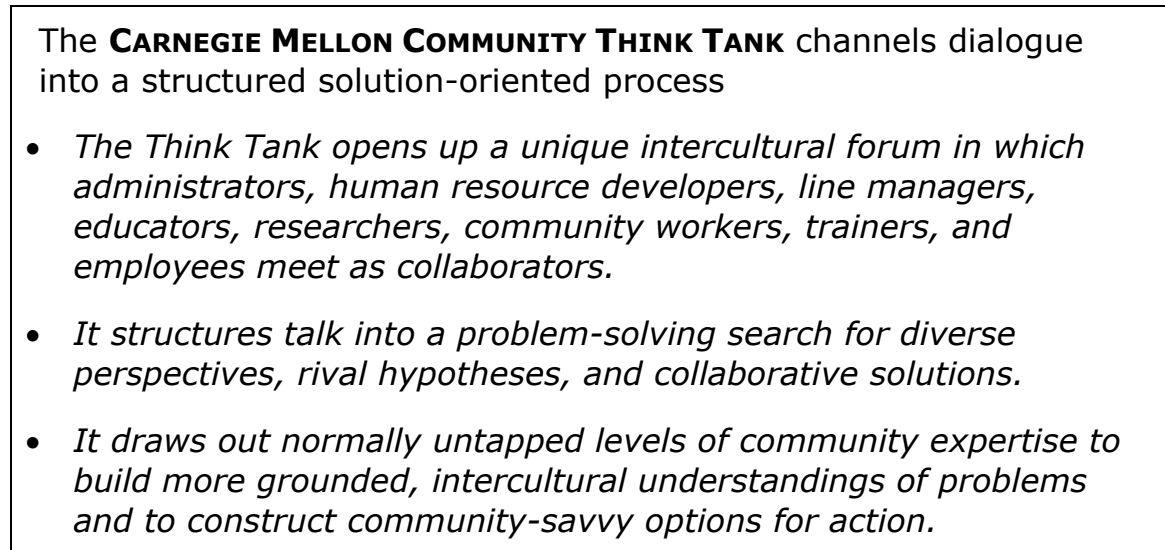


Figure 1. Overview from the Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank Brief #1

I will use this brief position statement to organize the three sections of this chapter because, in naming the aspirations that define the Think Tank as a social cognitive activity, it also names three inevitably problematic and potentially transforming features of intercultural knowledge building.

1. *Designing an intercultural forum*

The presence of competing discourses not only poses internal contradictions for this activity, but points to the limitations of merely inviting diversity to the table.

2. *Structuring inquiry within diversity*

How then does one shape an inquiry that actively *uses* difference? The literate practices of the Think Tank are a test of one working hypothesis.

3. *Building intercultural knowledge*

How do we judge the outcome of such dialogue—given its highly situated representation of human activity and contrast to a rationalized or abstract argument? Can it offer participants a *working theory* for situated, intercultural problem solving?

I. Designing An Intercultural Forum

“The Think Tank opens up a unique intercultural forum in which administrators, human resource developers, line managers, educators,

researchers, community workers, trainers, and employees meet as collaborators.” –Brief #1

The Think Tank we will examine, on “Negotiating the Culture of Work,” extended over 18 months and by the end had involved over 50 people in structured dialogues. Invited in groups of 15-25 at a session, people met at the Community House for 3-hour sessions, where they worked in small groups around a table and as whole body.⁶ People came to these end-of-the-work day sessions (and often stayed later) for various reasons: Many had a professional investment in workforce or social issues and a university Center had invited them. But it became clear that even more had deep personal commitments to the community and were drawn by the rare opening for dialogue across social and institutional differences. Many came because the Think Tank’s co-director, Wayne Cobb, could call on strong personal relationships within the city’s black community. In section II, we will examine the process, its participants, and practices in more detail. But first I want to pull back for a larger view and raise some of the inevitable internal contradictions inherent in trying to design an intercultural dialogue.

Posing the Problem

The “problem” motivating this Think Tank had various names depending on where you stood—for some it was named as the transition from welfare and school to work; for others with a regional perspective, it was a workforce without skills or “work readiness;” for managers it was performance problems on the job; for many it was the struggle for respect and a living wage. The concerns and ways of naming them were divergent but the problems were deeply interconnected.⁷

True dialogue needs a point of stasis, a way of opening a shared question so that people can deliberate together (and not just rehearse their standard stories). The Think Tank tried to provide this starting point with a Briefing Book which dramatized a number of key issues in a short case study called, “In Training,” the story of Melissa, a composite of many welfare-to-work stories and research. Figure 2, an excerpt from the Briefing Book’s 2-page problem scenario, poses a widely felt dilemma in the workplace: Who is finally responsible for Melissa’s on-the-job training? And it poses for us one of the trade-offs you must make in designing dialogue. For in using a problem case to focus deliberation you inevitably narrow the process of problem posing as well.

THE "IN TRAINING" PROBLEM SCENARIO

The Decision Makers

Human Resource Managers and Trainers
 The Admissions Office Manager (Mr. Snyder)
 An Inexperienced Employee (Melissa)
 Her Co-workers

Orientation day: (Hiring, Training)

Melissa, a young woman who has just completed a welfare-to-work program, is feeling pretty confident that her future is teeming with possibilities after landing the long-awaited "good job" at University Medical Corp. After a brief but intense orientation process, she's finishing up her computerized systems overview training today. She's feeling somewhat dazed with technological information overload, but is moving forward unfazed. Tomorrow it's off to the Admissions Office—the standard beginning placement position. Although entry-level wages are low, this is the point of entry to the coveted jobs in the executive staff pool, which offer benefits, training, and mobility.

Week One: (Communication and Work Support)

Upon Melissa's arrival to admissions, Mr. Snyder, her supervisor, was pleasantly surprised—taking careful note of her well-tailored suit and attractive appearance. His customary initial meeting stressed how his unit was evaluated based on efficiency and attention to details; Melissa appeared undaunted by his expectations. Days later Melissa gets a somewhat different, if perplexing, insider version over coffee break. Snyder, who had bitterly complained to Human Resources for sending him "all these welfare-to-work recruits," was overheard to actually thank H.R. for finally sending him someone who "looked alright."

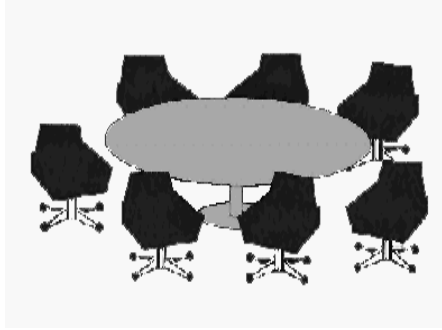
The hospital's information technology is demanding: the new Admissions software is prone to freeze and/or deny access to the next user if an entry does not fit its template. The communications system within the hospital seems to assume that you already know "who to ask." Melissa has recovered from a small series of such breakdowns by asking whoever is nearby to bail her out, and so far this has covered up what she fears might be seen as a failure. Snyder had said to route questions through him, but he clearly seems too rushed and busy to bother with all these "how to" details.

Week Two—Monday at 5:00 p.m. (Community Support)

[As the case develops, Melissa's workplace problems interact with family difficulties . . .]

Figure 2. Excerpt from the Briefing Book: The Problem Scenario

Who Is at the Table?



The Think Tank creates an unusually diverse group of “experts.” In addition to bringing the usual suspects to the table—human resource managers from business, agency officers from regional development and social service, and teacher leaders from education—the Think Tank drew in an even larger proportion of grassroots urban problem solvers—youth leaders, program coordinators, advocates from community organizations, churches, non-profits. And perhaps, most importantly, it included people who had “been

there,” on welfare, on the street, or what Zempsky (1994) calls “churning” from one low-paid job to another. What united the group was an invitation to work as intercultural problem solvers, trying to find workable solutions to a set of workforce, workplace, and the worklife problems.

Competing Discourses

At this point in designing an intercultural dialogue, activity analysis prompts us to anticipate the competing voices and contradictions within this activity system. In a Community Think Tank the potential for conflict is built into the very structure of the discourse: It brings an open recognition of systemic racial, social and economic problems into the practical discussion of management and performance. It enfranchises competing problem representations. And it opens the door to diverse discourses with a history of mutual incomprehensibility.

For example, the elite discourses of policy, regional talk, social services and academic analysis speak with abstractions and terms of art. They organize their claims around disciplinary “commonplaces” and assumptions that give face credibility to a line of argument (Proir, 1998). Discourses are by nature exclusionary devices—they operate as identity cards that reveal who is “in” and who is “out” of the club (Gee, 1989). And elite discourses operate to maintain elite power in subtle ways, identifying the poor or marginalized as people without personal agency (e.g., as patients, clients, recipients) and at the same time as the cause of social problems (when the cause might have been as easily attributed to business decisions, working conditions etc.) (van Dijk, 1993).

The discourses in community organizations operate by different rules.⁸ They frequently depend on narrative, personal testimony, and charismatic speaking (Cushman, 1999; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Peck, 1991) Because they speak from a marginalized position, urban teenagers, neighborhood advocates, and the poor often resort to a rhetoric of complaint and blame (Peck, et al., 1995)—a vigorous rehearsal of the wrongs by others in a context they (the speakers) do not control. Standing out of power, the discourse of complaint and blame takes little responsibility for positive change; it finds its strength in pressure, exposure, disruption and advocacy (Alinsky, 1989). Community planning groups and forums also place great importance on allowing many voices to be heard, covering walls with a jumble of ideas on newsprint. Such

forums can end in the catharsis of complaint (landlords meet to again bemoan the tenant problem with one another, feel better and go home with nothing changed) (Flower & Deems, 2002). Or the newsprint is bundled up, its meaning reduced to the decisions and actions of the community organizer. The real purpose of such forums was not to build knowledge, but to allow “networking,” to generate emotional buy-in, or to demonstrate community support (Alinsky, 1989).



These competing discourses do not mix well. In addition to evident differences in status and power (which breed a mutual suspicion of motives), they operate by different rules, with different goals. In the *activity* of intercultural dialogue, we could say that these discourses operate as a multi-layered “system of signs” loaded with social and historical meaning well beyond the claims they make. Discourses work as powerful mediational tools—as thinking tools that shape what is thought and said, as literate

practices that (let those who control the practice) govern which ideas get heard and what will be documented as meaningful.

One of the central conflicts in a community dialogue is which (whose) discourse is going to be calling the shots. That is, whose discourse will be used to build knowledge in this event? Consider the implications for what I have been calling a set of “worklife, workplace, workforce” dilemmas. A discourse that controls the dialogue will dictate not merely vocabulary, but framing concepts, ways of arguing, and what counts as persuasive evidence. It will suggest an appropriate attitude—are our eyes set on justice or riveted by “practicality” to the bottom line? Who gets to be an expert? In short, the competition between these discourses affects not only language and knowledge (as ideas), but the shape of a literate and social activity and the relations among its participants.

Competing Models of Deliberation

The source of this dilemma is not limited to the local history of social groups and alignments based on race, class, and social/economic status—as powerful as those forces are. The dilemma is also rooted in the history and practice(s) of public deliberation, that were as contested in Greek democracies as they are in ours (Jarratt, 1991). Here again, the critical question is, who is at the table and what discourse is sitting at the head? Jurgen Haberman’s theory of the “public sphere” elaborates a widely held model of public dialogue based on Enlightenment rationality and

historically identified with the coffee houses, the salons, and the cafes of middle class society (Habermas, 1989, Hauser, 1999). This platform for deliberation about public questions is one that elicits rational argumentation, focused on generalizable issues, carried on by an educated and actively informed populace. It rises above partial perspectives and personal interest, thriving in the safety of common interest that allows for reasoned disagreement. But in the face of dominant, technologically supported ideologies, Habermas despairs: The unified national “public” that made up this public sphere has been co-opted by the mass media. Biased, superficial sound bites have eroded the possibility of rational public deliberation—if not the possibility of an informed, deliberative populace “competent to form its own judgments” (Habermas, 1989, p.90)

Habermas’s ideal of rational argumentation by an informed elite stands behind the discourse expectations and invitation list for prestige “think tanks,” academic symposia, and policy discussions (1984). However, others argue that the sheltering homogeneity of a “public” defined in this way typically excludes the concerns of women, the working class, and disenfranchised minorities; moreover, they assert, this isn’t how democracy actually works (Fraser, 1990; Hauser, 1999). Gerard Hauser’s alternative model of public dialogue reframes the discussion much in the spirit of activity theory. Instead of theorizing an ideal of public deliberation (based on philosophical rationalism), he asks how does the (social, cultural) process of public rhetoric in a flawed, contradictory democratic society actually seem to work?

His theory of vernacular rhetoric(s) argues that there is no disinterested, rational entity called “the public” to be engaged. There are instead people with diverse interests—and emotions and commitments—who are drawn together around an issue. Melissa, the manager who hires her, the co-workers who support and suffer her actions, and the legislator who mandates the work-to-welfare program are all drawn together into a public. In this case, it is a public that desperately needs to engage in deliberation. It is in these local vernacular publics that discourse does its work. The criterion for success is not consensus (in which the rationally “best” argument wins), but a “reasonable” decision within which a diverse (and probably still disagreeing) group of people can live. The goal of deliberation in this model is “interdependence with strangers” by understanding your own interests more broadly (Hauser, p. 53-54).

Two Welfare-to-Work Teams

The following vignette illustrates how a community problem-solving dialogue can be shot through with competing discourses and models of deliberation. Here, the organizers of an academic symposium decided to redefine their event as a Community Think Tank and transform the deliberation of a policy making elite into the dialogue of Habermas’ local, “interested” public. However, as this case suggests, designing a knowledge-building intercultural dialogue requires more than changing the guest list and yielding the floor.

The Think Tank model I describe in this paper typically involves a small group of people collaborating at half a dozen round tables with a dialogue leader and recorder. But when the Heinz School of Public Policy and Management decided to structure a symposium on “making welfare-to-work work” as think tank, the event filled a ballroom with over 230 people. And this

event gives us another insight into the difficulties of designing dialogue. The small knots of people, sitting knee to knee in a circle, working on their selected section of the Melissa case, formed unlikely collaborative teams: e.g., I found myself, a rhetoric professor, working with a low-skilled TANF (welfare) recipient heading to her first job, an Executive Director of the County Assistance Office, a middle-aged low income woman on disability at sea in the system, a social service worker, and an academic policy analyst.

In the final hour of the symposium each “table” was asked to report. People were engaged and focused. They often used the provided flip chart and made an effort to avoid redundancy—that is, to add their unique key points, conclusions, and rival notions to a slowly accumulating set of options for “making welfare-to-work work” being recorded at the front. When it was her turn, the speaker from Table 12, however, launched into a stirring harangue, aimed at the Welfare office administrator across the ballroom, charging that whatever new regulations and budget limitations his office was supposedly working under, everyone knew “the State had money;” there was no reason people couldn’t get the support they needed; “he,” “they,” “it” just needed to “do it.” The speaker was clearly warming to her performance when the moderator intervened, firmly reminding the speaker of her responsibility to seek joint, workable solutions.

The discourse initiated by Table 12 (or at least by its reporter) was a familiar cross-hierarchy move in intercultural and community organizing forums. The assertively myopic “victims” in this story have no interest in acknowledging constraints that the other party (i.e., the local, state-mandated welfare office) may face, because they (as victims) do not see themselves as part of the solution (and indeed are rarely part of the decision making process). In response the representatives of authority move to a discourse of aggrieved defense, or a patient (sometimes condescending) explanation of the status quo (under which they may be struggling as well). The point is, neither party in this discourse spends its energy imagining genuine, workable options. This assertion of competing discourses is better adapted to serving political ends than building new knowledge.

It was experience with exchanges like this that had led a professor of public policy to assure me that “We have tried inviting the ‘community’ (i.e., leaders of local community-based organizations) into our academic symposia, but it never works. It turns into speech-making instead of discussion.” Although each group told a truth the other needed to heed, neither way of telling produced transformative knowledge.

The use of diversity at Table 20 offered a sharp contrast to Table 12. Focused on the transportation problems that plague low-income workers, the group took the (novel) position that this was neither the State’s responsibility nor the individual’s personal problem alone. Working as knowledge builders at multiple levels, they proposed that the problem belonged to all parties including the administration, which chose to benefit by hiring TANF workers, the line manager, and the co-workers who depended on her contribution in the office. The group then began framing local actionable solutions, down to starting a car pool, while demanding a new level of corporate responsibility.

Outcomes of Diversity

As this vignette suggests, a community problem-solving dialogue is an activity rife with social and literate practices that can derail knowledge building. The problem cannot be reduced to the unscalable barriers of race, class, and education—they are not insurmountable. But nor can it be avoided by designing a forum around naïve plans to “just talk,” that ignore what activity theory reminds us are the “continuous, self-reproducing, systemic, and longitudinal-historical aspects of human functioning” (Engeström, 1999a, p.22). These dialogues are inevitably a contact zone for multiple discourses, with their heterogeneous “voices” prompting participants with cues for what to say, how to say it, and how to interpret the words and intent of others (Kochman, 1981).

The inescapable conclusion, which intercultural forums ignore to their peril, is that the presence of diversity is not a guarantor of intercultural inquiry or problem solving. Being heard is not being a collaborator. And merely hearing the voices and positions of others can leave one’s image of a problem unscathed, one’s plan of action unchanged. The challenge for intercultural knowledge building is whether new knowledge has been constructed or whether prior knowledge has been transformed, by testing, qualifying, or conditionalizing previous ideas. And if so, whose knowledge? Does it exist only in the moment of dialogue, in a transcript, and the eye of the analyst? Or do the actors/decision makers in this activity see new options?⁹

II. Structuring A Dialogue to Use Difference

“The Community Think Tank structures talk into a problem-solving search for diverse perspectives, rival hypotheses, and collaborative solutions.”—Brief # 1

Creating a forum that gives a voice to difference and enfranchises marginalized groups has its own merit in a democratic society, but it does not guarantee that new or intercultural knowledge will be constructed. The Community Think Tank is best described as a theory-guided experiment in using diversity to achieve that end—its literate practices work as a mediating tool that structures both the social and intellectual process of inquiry in some distinctive ways.

Dialogue As A Socially Organized Activity

It is more accurate to speak of constructing a dialogue than of holding one. The series of events that make up the Think Tank process (see Figure 3) begins by laying a foundation—using literature reviews, interviews and small group sessions to uncover competing representations of the problem. This leads to dialogues focused on decision making which in turn becomes the foundation both for documenting these findings and for supporting local action.

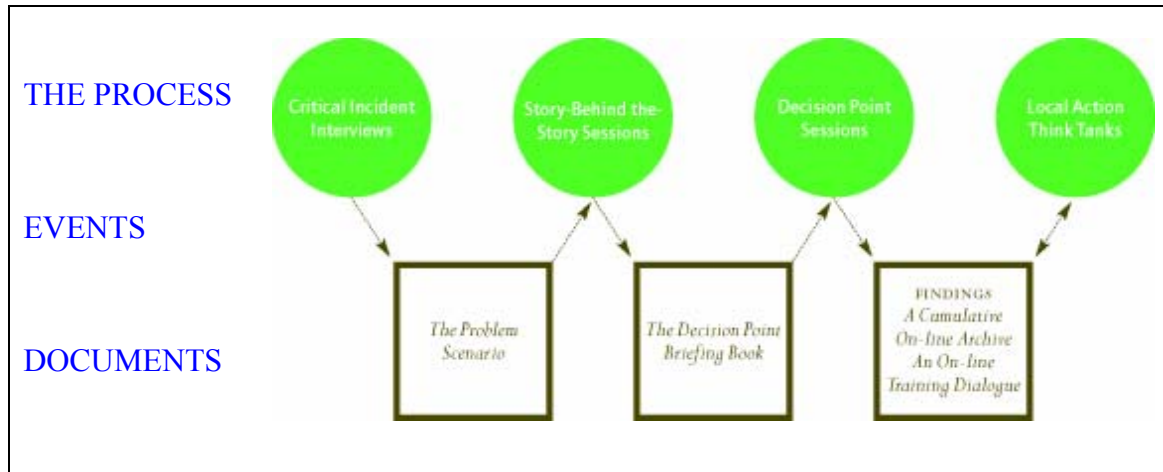


Figure 3. The Process of Developing a Community Think Tank

- *Critical incident interviews.* The Think Tank team identifies key problems by combining a standard literature review with “critical incident” data (Flanagan, 1954) from local managers, employees and their supporters. This analysis of the live issues is transformed into a locally grounded, data-based scenario and a set of decision points (such as we saw in the Melissa case in Figure 2) that will be used to focus the Think Tank deliberations.
- *Story-Behind-the-Story sessions.* In these additional discussions and interviews we ask a diverse body of people to interpret “what is happening?” in the scenario so we can document strong “rival readings” of its problematic events. This attempt to probe the meaning of an event often uncovers the hidden logic of an actor like Melissa or the manager (as different people see it) and reveals starkly contrasting interpretations of an event. This expanded representation of the problem is now used to construct the Briefing Book which all Think Tank participants will use as a springboard to their own deliberation.
- *Decision Point sessions.* It is now time to shift the focus to choices, decisions, and actions within workforce policy, management, education, human resources, or community support. Think Tank participants (responding to the Briefing Book and a dramatized scene) seek rival hypotheses and construct and test more diversely informed options. The results of these invitational “expert” sessions are documented in the Findings.
- *Local Action Think Tanks.* These forums are an extension of the Think Tank that support direct action by initiating this same inquiry process within individual workplaces, career centers, and community organizations. With the support of a trained local leader and the Think Tank’s on-line tools, these dialogues can help a group turn talk into strategic, local action.

As Figure 3 suggests, the process of building a dialogue is an interplay of documents and events, in which each shapes and mediates the other. Constructing a document (and the various events that subsequently use it) involves seeking out and orchestrating a number of metaphorical “voices” in addition to those of live participants. For example, the Problem Scenario, Briefing Book and *Findings* (with their mix of narrative, argument, evidence, testimony, and practical

plans) are trying to integrate multiple kinds of data and alternative ways of representing the problem. They must capture the abstract voices of published reports, data and policies found in the literature, the rich specifics of critical incident interviews, the interpretations drawn from rival readings of problem cases, and the action plans of decision-making dialogues. These documents, and their mix of mini-genres, are a footprint of the socially organized events and the actors that produced them.

At the same time, these documents are also strategically designed to mediate the next event in the process; that is, they are structured to work as a fairly explicit scaffold for literate action, guiding interpretation, comparisons, discussion etc. For example, the use of written narrative, dialogue, and live dramatization is designed to spark engagement and draw out situated knowledge from participants. The Briefing Book, on the other hand, tries to focus attention on a set of shared problems. Anticipating the possibility of competing discourses (such as we saw from Table 12 earlier), the Briefing Book uses a visual format and prompts to draw the participants into proposing rival hypotheses and decision-making. Figure 4 shows how the page for Decision Point #4 combines an example of an option with blank spaces for the participant’s ideas. The *Findings* (see Figure 6) are both an archive created at the end of the series and a tool designed to document, teach, and persuade a range of possible users and participants. The point here is that the intercultural dialogue we are examining is best understood not as an informational digest, a training document, or a conversational meeting of minds, but as an extended, highly mediated social and material process of building knowledge.¹⁰

Now jot down your ideas for options and outcomes

Decision Point #4. Melissa needs help with “how to” questions and has a choice to ask co-workers or a friend for help, or to save face, act and hope.

| <i>Option:</i> | <i>Outcome</i> |
|---|---|
| Example: Melissa could sit down and talk with Snyder at the end of the day. | But Snyder has no back-up plan in place to help her. He is just setting her up for failure. |
| | |



Figure 4. The Briefing Book as a Scaffold for Literate Action

Dialogue as an Intellectual Stance

It would be a mistake, however, to see the Think Tank as primarily a structured social event, because it also asks the participants, as individuals, to engage in a demanding kind of thinking. It stands in the tradition of philosophical pragmatism, which acknowledges that even our most favored accounts of the world are still, and only, our best current hypotheses. This recognition of uncertainty calls for what John Dewey (1988) named “an experimental way of knowing”—an unflagging, continued attention to the disconfirming as well as the confirming messages of experience and a openness to the infinite revisability of what we see as “truth.”

As an intercultural inquiry, this dialogue is shaped even more directly by Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism, which calls us to identify the causes of injustice and social misery and organize morally activated collaborative action against them. Pragmatism is quintessentially a theory of action, yet the twin pillars of West’s call to activism also depend on an individual intellectual stance—what he calls a “critical temper as a way of struggle and democratic faith as a way of life” (p.140, 1993).

The critical temper promotes a full-fledged experimental disposition that highlights the provisional, tentative and revisable character of our visions, analyses and actions. Democratic faith consists of a Pascalian wager (hence underdetermined by the evidence) on the abilities and capacities of ordinary people to participate in decision-making procedures of institutions that fundamentally regulate their lives” (p.140).

But how might we ordinary people translate this temper and faith into an everyday literate practice? In this context, engaging in an intercultural dialogue demands what my colleagues and I have described as a “strong rival hypothesis stance” to the open question on the table (Flower, Long & Higgins, 2000). Entertaining rival hypotheses is at the center of many forms of rhetorical, philosophical and scientific inquiry—if only on the way to building one’s own case. But the *strong* version of this stance takes one beyond merely considering available alternative understandings, to actively seeking them out, eliciting rivals that might remain silent, striving to comprehend them, and, in embracing the difficulty of talking across difference, expanding our understanding of a more multi-faceted reality.

The members of a Think Tank are asked to take this strong rivaling stance to inquiry by momentarily stepping outside familiar discourses (e.g., community advocacy, academic argument, social counseling, business management) and putting aside some of their standard discussion strategies (e.g., for getting the floor, making a point, winning arguments, or

smoothing over dissension). They are asked to enter the dialogue using a set of *strategies* designed to seek rival readings of the world, that is, to support and draw out the local knowledge of their partners, to explore options, and to use their differences (in effect to privilege them) to create a collaboratively expanded understanding.

At the beginning of this Decision Point session the facilitator gives a brief introduction to the rules of the game:

I should start this dialogue out with our standard warning. You don't see community problem-solving dialogues like this one very often. The reason is, it isn't easy to hold this kind of discussion. It means that if you're Preacher, you can't preach. If you're teacher you don't get to teach. Social workers, you can't tell us what guidance you would offer, and managers, you don't get to tell us what is wrong with employees and youth of today.

A community problem-solving dialogue has three rules:

- One is, we are focused on a problem. This is not rap session, but an effort to imagine action—collaboratively
- Secondly, we are here to seek out differences and work as planning partners to develop each other's ideas.
- Finally, we use two strategies, called "Rivaling" and "Options and Outcomes," to structure our inquiry.

The first mandate—to focus on decision points and envision actions—helps the group put aside the rhetoric of complaint and blame when it begins to take the floor. And it prompts them to draw one another into a rhetoric of decision-making. The second feature is designed to replace silencing and polarizing discourses (the prestige talk of the academy and policy makers, the adversarial talk of advocacy) with a problem-solving discourse in which everyone is a learner and the expertise of ordinary people is central. Participants are shown how to take the role of a collaborative planning partner, charged to draw out the thoughts of other speakers before they launch into their own (Flower et al., 1994).

If the first two rules of the game call for an attitude of inquiry, it is the focus on named strategies that makes this attitude operational and lets participants act as self-conscious agents in a knowledge-building process. The "Options and Outcomes" strategy counters a common tendency in decision-making (to consider only one option and decide "yes or no") by asking participants to generate multiple "real" options. Then, because the solutions to complex problems often involve tradeoffs, or there is no obviously "good" option, the strategy asks participants to project and compare possible outcomes. At this point, concerns with values and the probability of an outcome often enter the discussion. The "Rivaling" strategy, challenges members to take a rival hypothesis stance to problems: to see them as open questions with no single answer; to enter this intercultural dialogue actively seeking rival hypotheses and interpretations, and most difficult of all, to seek to rival one's own first or favored ideas.

Although the table leader is the most explicit and consistent user of these strategies, the self-consciously strategic nature of this dialogue is reinforced by text and the agenda that culminates in tables sharing and comparing their own rival options. Participants are surrounded by cues to strategic thinking by handouts and prompts on small “table tents,” and by the format of the Briefing Book organized around decision points, followed by rivals and empty double columns calling for Options and Outcomes. The notion of “rivaling” becomes a term of art people use with self-conscious humor.

Dialogue as a Process of Rewriting Representations

The Think Tank Decision Point session that we examine below is what we called an “expert session” inviting people from different organizations around the city, who deal with this problem in their own diverse ways. The episode we will analyze brings together at one table a university policy researcher, the local president of an African American union, the manger of a large human resources department, and the table leader from the Think Tank team (the one Anglo-American member of this group). They are working together on Decision Point # 4 (see Figure 6) at a table covered with Briefing Books they had received in the mail, a crib sheet on dialogue strategies, a tape recorder, laptop computer for recording key points, and plates of food. This is the first time most have met one another.

Figure 5 documents a sequence of dialogue moves from this session and lets us track how these moves led to shifts in the group’s representation of what on-the-job training could mean. The left column gives a shorthand identification of the speaker and the strategy in play. The right contains brief excerpts that convey the gist of the speaker’s comment. We will follow three threads in the dialogue which reveal distinctive patterns of knowledge building.

The policy researcher (University), who has been looking over the Briefing Book, gets the inquiry going by reviewing the options and outcomes he sees open to Melissa at Decision Point # 4, as she tries to recover from errors and gain competence (see Figures 2 and 4 for excerpts from the Briefing Book). As he sees it, none of Melissa’s options appear very desirable.

There seem to me to be three options. One is to go ahead and ask for help and feel like he is going to think she is stupid and maybe not even help her at all. Get your co-worker to bail you out—and they might think you are stupid too. Or maybe just say nothing at all.

HR, the human resource manger then takes the floor confidently explaining the training procedure at her institution. At Episode 1, University breaks in seeking a rival perspective from Union.

At the Table:

- University (policy researcher)
- Union (president of African American union]

- Table leader (facilitator dialogue)
- HR (manager of large Human Resources department)

| | SPEAKER & MOVE | COMMENT |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | University (Seeks Rivals) Seeks a different perspective after HR talks | (University asks Union) So in your environment, how much of the training are they going to get through their boss or training, and how much from their co-workers? |
| 2 | Union (Poses Rivals / Conditionalizes) | Depending...you will have some employees [saying] "It's not my responsibility to train." There is a component within the contract; you could put some [at a higher level job] to train, but a lot of times management tries to get away with having people do those things, without putting them in that higher level job to do that. |
| 3 | Table leader (Poses rivals) | Can we follow up and pursue the options of employee assistance?. . . (University's) idea is to have an employee assistance, a non-judgmental support group, and you're saying it shouldn't be just co-worker because there are all kinds of dynamics going on there. |
| 4 | University (Poses option) | Let me suggest an alternative. To me a creative and supportive work environment would encourage workers to help each other. |
| 5 | HR (Poses option) Redefines University's option into a professional program, focused on actions of HR and accountability | What I think is that one of the solutions to her problem would be what you are saying, an employee assistance program. We used to have a buddy program; for any one we hired we had selected people that were responsible for training the people once they got to the floor. . . They were to go to this one specific person for any problems, so if there was any repercussion, this one specific person was totally responsibility. |
| 6 | University (Seeks rivals) | You know I was going to follow up with something about mentors, but then I realized that you are talking about something different. To me a buddy will answer those, "How do I...?" or "What comes next?" kinds of questions. |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| | <p>Rival interpretations of "buddy"</p> <p>(Poses option)</p> <p>Based on his workplace</p> | <p>A mentor will help you assess more strategic issues. What skills do I need to get from point A to Point B? Who should I be talking to to figure out where I am going to be five years from now? My employer has a mentor system, but those mentors were senior folks . . . They weren't the kind of folks I could go to to say, " I don't know how to work this computer program."</p> |
| 7 | <p>Union</p> <p>(Poses Rival)</p> <p>Redefines the key problem</p> | <p>You know, I think key to this type of thing is, what is the culture like on the particular job? . . .</p> <p>I work in a different environment than that. . . Where I work, there have been employees that flat-out refuse...to train people. And that came out of a knowledge that really contractually, management didn't have a right to make them do that, and compounding that in some situations there were race, what appeared to be race discrimination issues because they had in some instances trained other individuals but then in other situations chose, "I'm not doin' that."</p> <p>And really there was no way to compel them to do that, but now there is an extra burden on this new person. (laughs) This is really somethin'. "They told me so and so was going to train me. They flat out refuse to do it and I'm right here."</p> |
| 8 | <p>Union</p> <p>Restructures his own thinking</p> | <p>You know, it is really occurring to me that a component—how to be a personal advocate for yourself—needs to somehow get built into the understanding of people coming new into the workforce, if they're doing nothing more than keeping a log of what's going on.</p> |
| 9 | <p>University and HR</p> <p>(Pose Rivals)</p> | <p>University: In my work environment . . . [poses collegial mentoring process]</p> <p>HR: (laughs) Not true for the majority . . .</p> |

| | | |
|--------|--|--|
| | Clarify differences | There's a lot of competition out there and people resent helping another person because the other person is going to go get promoted. |
| 1 0 | HR (Reviews Options) | In my company when have mentors and buddies, and we do offer incentives to group leaders and they are given a monetary, you know, a little bit of money. It give them that extra dollar or two dollars to do this, the expectation is that whoever is assigned to you, you are going to help, and if that person fails, then you are going to have to answer for that. |
| 1 1 | Table Leader (Seeks Rivals) Asks HR to rival herself | What's the downside of that? |
| 1 2 | HR (Poses Rivals) | <p>Downside is that you are telling these people that "we are paying you to tell these people the right thing to do, to train them properly," and just because you give them a dollar or two dollars to do that it doesn't mean that that is what they are going to do.</p> <p>If I don't want to train them, I'm not going to train them: "I don't like their attitude." "Melissa is assigned to me. I am supposed to be helping her. She has an attitude. I can't deal with the attitude. That's right. She does nothing that I tell her to do." (Mentor is thinking to herself.) "Now I am familiar with Human Resources so I am going to go there before you do, because you [the new employee] don't know how to go to Human Resources as yet. I'm getting my story in."</p> <p>You have people coming up and saying, "I don't like her.... She's ohhhh, that girlllll, I just don't like her...." They'll say, "I didn't train her because she didn't listen. I didn't train her because she's never there, she didn't come in on time." The girl may be one minute late getting on the floor and they'll say, "She's never there on time. "</p> |
| 1 | University | That's interesting....In my ideal work environment the new employee would not be told what to do by their |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3 | (Poses Rivals) Qualifies (and critiques) HR from his "collegial" perspective | buddy. The new employee would ask a lot of questions: "How do I do this; how do I do that." |
|---|---|---|

Figure 5. Dialogue Moves from a Decision Point Session

One thread of this dialogue traces a suggestive shift in HR's insistently professional representation of the problem. University proposes a "creative and supportive work environment" in which workers "help each other," (Episode 4). When HR picks up this thread, she unhesitatingly translates University's idea ("what you are saying") into a standard "employee assistance program" and a "buddy program"—that is, into a professionally organized and administrated activity in which the worker is the client and mandated recipient. By Episode 10 this has become an economic relationship in which the "buddy" is both paid and accountable for the failure of the new employee. One could say that HR is contributing to the inquiry up to this point by speaking from a distinctive, if rather single-minded standpoint, even as Union poses alternative accounts of what happens in "his" organization.

But in Episode 11 the Table Leader asks HR—as the expert on the actual outcomes of this option—to rival herself: "What's the downside of that [mentor system]?" HR responds with a dramatic enactment of what happens to the "professional option" in context—where payment doesn't mean performance, where attitudes (of mentor and mentee) dictate practice. To capture this other reality, HR moves into dialogue, playing the parts of complaining mentors who know how to get their story heard first. In short, her rivaling move brings a bruising new dimension of social and economic reality into the deliberation—and qualifies her own easy rehearsal of options.

A second thread of the dialogue shows how another participant, Union, appropriated the rivaling strategy to significantly redefine the problem itself in terms of the "culture of the workplace" and to bring the hard-to-discuss presence of racism into the discussion. Recall how in Episode 5 University posed an option based on his image of a supportive, mentoring workplace. Union, whose thinking is exploratory but still privileged because he can speak from a "different environment," begins to direct attention to the "culture, like on a particular job." As he develops his idea, it becomes clear that the outcome of HR's mentoring programs cannot be separated from the pervasive effects of racism. Like HR, he pursues this idea by building a highly situated representation. With rueful laughter and the comment, "This is really somethin'," we see the new worker, standing there in perplexity: "They told me so and so was going to train me. They flat out refuse to do it and I'm right here." (Episode 7)

The volatile issue of racism is often difficult to handle in intercultural forums. Although the members of Union's labor union felt strongly about this issue, it entered their public deliberations only through indirection and innuendo. But in this situation the dynamics of a

community problem-solving dialogue encouraged the explicit, shared use of a rivaling strategy and privileged stories-behind-the-story. They let Union transform what could have been an implicit accusation into an empirical observation of a significant and not improbable outcome of mentoring systems. Unlike an advocacy discourse, in which the dialogue-stopping accusation of racism trumps other concerns, Union's representation shows racism as a discussible action, interacting with other desired, unwanted, and unanticipated outcomes. It becomes a problem HR administrators must deal with, not a situation they defend against admitting.

A third thread of the dialogue shows how a rival that is initially interpreted as a training option (and is laughingly "voted down" as unrealistic) ends up producing instead a more qualified working understanding of what training could mean. When University sketched his norm of a supportive, mentoring workplace (in Episodes 5 and 10), his rival is met with genial laughter at the table: "Not true for the majority . . . There's a lot of competition out there. . . ." The inquiry then moves to "realistic" options suited to managing power motives through incentives and accountability. In a discussion structured as a debate or a rationalized search for the "best argument" and strongest reasons, the voices of experience would have normally trumped and dismissed University's apparently naïve model of employee development as irrelevant (and have potentially silenced University). What happens instead is perhaps an even more significant contribution to the inquiry. University re-enters the discussion (Episode 14) not to defend an option, but to rival one of the fundamental assumptions of the reigning HR "trainer" model, which places the agency and power in the hands of the trainer who *tells*, rather than in the hands of an employee who *asks*. By posing his collegial, question-asking relationship as an ideal, University throws into sudden relief the hierarchical nature of the buddy system itself and the way it places the agency for learning in the hands of others.

His comment doesn't defeat the HR option for training and support; it suggests a transformation of how it is done. University's rival does its work not by opposition or simple critique, but by leading the discussion toward building a qualified, revised vision of a solution, in which the agency of the worker is a critical factor. The option that takes shape in this brief dialogue has expanded to include some new criteria for success, i.e., employees who are empowered to ask (Episode 14) and to become personal advocates for themselves (Episode 9). Although these rival representations offer a radical challenge to some aspects of the HR model, they appear to work in this dialogue as overlapping rather than opposing representations that tend to restructure the option rather than destroy the opposition.

This dialogue is a complex event open to multiple close readings. My point in tracing these three threads is to illustrate how people appropriated the Think Tank's intellectual stance and used the rivaling strategy to challenge, expand, and redefine a problem representation. Rivals work here as cumulative knowledge-building tools. They enter as stories told from alternative professional, cultural and racial perspectives, as hypotheses about the key factors, and as predictions of likely outcomes and the complex mix of intended and unintended consequences any action will have to deal with. As people try to share the complex networks of their personal knowledge—through examples, narratives, experiences, reflections, quandaries, and highly situated observations—these networks differ but also overlap and transform one another. They reinforce a piece of the

picture here, contradict a piece there, and build in critical qualifications. And at times, they restructure a whole linked network of images and ideas around a different central idea, around, for instance, the agency of the mentee rather than that of the mentor and manager. Rivals help people to redefine and reprioritize, to qualify and conditionalize their own ideas and others'. This strategic form of dialogue, then, is using difference to help people construct a negotiated meaning—an expanded, reorganized network of information and attitudes around the Melissa question that attempts to acknowledge and accommodate rival representations and ways of knowing.¹¹

Whose Knowledge Is Changing?

If this intercultural knowledge building is indeed a social and a cognitive process (a collaborative and an individual/internal act), we must recognize that the emerging knowledge sketched above is what is described as a social construction (Nystrand et. al., 1993). It emerged in the exchange or temporal space created by the conversation; it now exists in the resulting transcript and in the minds of documentors, analysts, and readers like yourself. It may have never existed in representations constructed by the participants or in the understanding they left with or retained the next morning. We must not blithely assume that the representation we (as analysts) *can* construct is what the actors heard, understood, or *did* construct with their own inferential links, not to mention what they recalled or acted on.

In an intercultural dialogue, the knowledge that matters most is what the actors within the activity construct—since it is their understanding that is realized in actions and outcomes.¹² (For instance in Episode 6, HR happily but inaccurately appropriates University's image of a creative work environment to her image of a professionally administered "employee assistance program." Although she appears to be building in good faith on "what you're saying," she seems instead to have imported a prior professional schema, a notion of support built around paid work, accountability and repercussions. In short, we must view any image of an emerging and transformed representation with some skepticism.

On the other had, there is also evidence in the excerpt that the participants are cooperating in building a progressively transformed option. University suddenly realizes how his mentor idea differs from and qualifies the buddy plan: "You know I was going to follow up with something about mentors, but then I realized that you were talking about something different" (Episode 7). Union, responds to these distinctions with a reflective reappraisal: "You know, I think the key to this type of thing is what is the culture like on the particular job" (Episode 8), and later, "You know, it is really occurring to me that a component, how to be a personal advocate for yourself needs to some how get built in . . ." (Episode 9). And at the prompt of the table leader, HR engages in a sustained rival of her own position ("The downside is that . . .") that elaborates a piece of the picture Union had raised back at Episode 3). These bits of evidence suggest that the participants are not only sharing perspectives but are collaboratively building, elaborating, qualifying and conditionalizing a collaboratively constructed representation. And that this

representation exists, at some level, as a transformation of their own knowledge and understanding.

III. Building New Knowledge

“A Community Problem-Solving Dialogue draws out normally untapped levels of community expertise to build more grounded, intercultural understandings of problems and to construct community-savvy options for action.”—Brief #1

Using Documentation to Mediate Inquiry and Represent Knowledge

Documentation is a critical part of a Think Tanks’ knowledge-building activity. For the immediate participants, multicultural forums are contact zones using difference to create productive upset and transformed understanding. But people’s memory for schema-violating information can be fragile. For participants, documentation not only reminds; it clarifies, consolidates, and invites reflection. In the larger picture, these participants are also stand-in knowledge builders for their professional and social communities. The texts that emerge from the Think Tank (from its interviews, story-behind-the-story and decision point sessions) let others (colleagues, Local Action sites, Internet readers) participate in a virtual intercultural dialogue.

Texts also shape that participation (Wertsch, 1991). Documentation is a tool that in fact mediates the entire process. It works as a set of artifacts and as a technology for thinking that structures what participants do, the representations they build, and the representation given to others. We saw how the Briefing Book (Figures 2 and 4) guided Decision Point participants to focus on a paradigm case and grapple with a starter set of diverse interpretations. The subsequent, published *Findings* (Figure 6) try in their own way to replicate the social and cognitive dynamic of a Think Tank session. Unlike a policy report, newsletter, or the minutes and newsprint that get bundled up at meeting’s end, the *Findings* attempt to simulate the activity, inviting readers into an unresolved problem, complicated by multiple readings, leading to a decision point at which multiple players must test their options in an intercultural crucible. We can see this in Figure 6 excerpted from the section called Decision Point #4, focused on our training problem. (Note: Paragraph numbers are added to the text for convenient reference. The full document is available on <http://www.cmu.edu/thinktank/>)

Decision Point #4: Work Support

The situation demands on-the-job-learning, but without systematic support by HR, management, or co-workers, the employee is left to negotiate a hazardous terrain.

Option #1: The company puts a short-term support or buddy system in place for new employees to turn to for advice.

Academic Contribution

Federal policy analysts argue that there is a disconnection between family, school, community, business, and agencies; this disconnection can lead to failure for inexperienced workers in the system. For example, a young mother who is taking a job training course could ultimately fail to find work if her issues

[text deleted].

Option #2: Melissa decides to ask her co-workers for advice on an “as needed” basis and avoid bothering the busy manager

¹*An employee says:* Co-workers don’t always know how to handle problems, and they may give bad advice just to look good in front of the “new girl.” Sometimes advice is bad advice, and how is Melissa going to know that?

²*The employee’s Story Behind the Story:* One time I was working as a receptionist at a school and I had a problem with the computer. I asked at least four different people for help, and got different answers from each of them. And none of their solutions worked! Turns out, one of them was well known for stabbing people in the back, another was incompetent with technology, and another was preoccupied and just gave the wrong information.

³*A human resources manager says:* The co-workers will start to resent all of the interruptions from Melissa. They have their own jobs to do, and wasn’t the training program supposed to get her ready to work? Why do they have to take up the slack for Melissa? Some of the co-workers may even start to complain to Mr. Snyder or to each other about Melissa’s incompetence.

⁴*An educator says:* Co-workers coming in and fixing Melissa’s problems is not an effective way for Melissa to learn how to truly fix problems. These co-workers aren’t trained as educators and may just be going in and “fixing” without actually telling Melissa how to fix the problems herself, or how to avoid them in the first place.

⁵Option #3: The company could have a mentor who works full time on an individual basis with new welfare-to-work employees. The mentor could help with technical questions, but also with personal issues like childcare, transportation, and communication.⁶

⁷*A human resources manager says:* That’s what all human resources departments are for -- to help out employees. But I think it is inappropriate for the hr department to intervene in the personal lives of employees -- instead, we can refer the employees to family, church, or a CBO.

⁸*A welfare recipient says:* If Melissa had someone who was working on her behalf, a lot of problems would be avoided. Maybe Melissa doesn’t know her rights, or even the bus schedule. This way, she wouldn’t have to look silly by asking her boss; instead she’ll look strong because she’ll be solving her own problems.

⁹*The welfare recipient’s Story Behind the Story:* I had a job once where the supervisor would not let me go on a bathroom break except for lunch. Well, I never found out until after I left -- but it is illegal to stop me from using the bathroom! And that was the major reason I quit that job.

(Paragraph numbers are added for convenience of reference.)

Figure 6. *The Findings*: Selected Options for Decision Point #4

What Sort of Knowledge Does Intercultural Knowledge Building Build?

What sort of knowledge can a think tank construct? The representation in the *Findings*, which tries to replicate the experience of the dialogue itself, clearly bears only passing resemblance to a structured argument with its body of explicit and logically linked claims and evidence. The distinguishing feature of the *Findings*, I will argue, is the way this representation of meaning can at times re-create the *dynamics* of a social/cultural/cognitive activity, in action. This distinction between a canonical argument and an activity may give us a more sensitive way to gauge the complexity and coherence of the knowledge found in Figure 6.

A typical policy argument on welfare to work or a management report on on-the-job training problems would be organized around a set of claims, supported by data, and licensed by warrants (Toulmin, 1969). It would strive to achieve warranted assent, i.e., a consensus in which the “best” argument wins. In this logic-dominated view of public discourse, winning will be based on the rational force of one’s arguments and the rational necessity of the abstract principles on which those arguments lie (Hauser, 1999, p. 52-55).

By contrast, the *Findings*, like the dialogues themselves, are a mixture of analysis and narrative, arguments and stories, policy issues and speaking voices. These rival readings of the world do not resolve themselves into discrete opposing claims, but into partially contradictory, partially overlapping, sometimes co-existing networks of knowledge. They possess the character of an activity system which, as Engeström describes it, “is not a homogeneous entity. To the contrary, it is composed of a multitude of often disparate elements, voices, and viewpoints” (1993, p. 68). Within these elements we can see “historical layers” that shape not only the activity but also “the mental models of the subjects” themselves (p. 68).

Engeström’s model of an activity gives us a set of terms for more precisely mapping these “disparate elements,” into two trios of components: The first, most basic trio is the subject (or agent); the object (problem space and outcomes of activity); and the community which shares these outcomes. In Engeström’s model, some of the fundamental contradictions in activity systems become even more apparent when we add a second trio of elements: tools, rules and the divisions of labor within the activity (the latter represented in my analysis as a form of power) (p. 67). Using this template, let us consider the representation of “training” found in the excerpt from the *Findings* in Figure 6.

Agents, Objects and Outcomes in a Community

The stories of the employee and HR manager (paragraphs 1-3) dramatize the presence of speaking employees, managers and welfare recipients who are all agents and the recipients of others’ actions. They carry on in a world peopled by helpful, incompetent, and back-stabbing co-workers, authoritarian supervisors and caring church members, within a community that goes

beyond the walls of the office to include welfare-to-work programs, academic research, and federal policy.

The voice of academic research (in paragraph 6) expands the scope of activity to a set of outcomes that escalate from failed training and flawed performance, to the failure of workers to find or keep a job, to the failure of federal policy. But the story is more complex—and the solution must be as well—because these options also produce and then interact with the intermediate outcomes of unwilling and incapable mentoring, resentful coworkers, employees trying to save face, and HR staff who say it isn't their problem.

Power

Issues of hierarchy, status, and power (associated with a division of labor) are palpable in this representation of the decisions around “Work Support.” The egregiously exploitative supervisor (paragraph 9), the complaining co-workers (paragraph 3), the trainer who “fixes” the problem without educating Melissa (paragraph 4), all these vignettes dramatize the presence of social and racial hierarchies and the stigma of welfare. The conflicts they engender show up in Melissa's face-saving, but self-defeating failure to get help. Because race is such an incendiary subject, it is often avoided in policy and management discussions. But here, as in the comments of the Union leader in Figure 4, it is placed on the table as a powerful, intensely problematic (yet not all-explaining) force in a complex human activity.

Rules

The rules (“the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions” (Engeström, 1993, p. 67)) that shape these decision are represented in the references to “welfare-to-work”, which signals employees who are subject to a raft of new regulations motivated by a mandate for “work first,” with education and assistance later. The federal analysts (paragraph 6) point out that unresolved problems of transportation and child care mean that employees are certain to fail in meeting these expectations. Meanwhile HR policy (paragraph 7) invokes another set of rules, which allows it to sidestep such problems by defining them as “personal.” It proposes a policy of referring folks to a family, church, or community organizations, even as the academic report (and the consensus of the Think Tank) asserts the disconnection between these parties. Even this small section of the *Findings* shows an activity rife with contradiction and decision points at which the actors must deal with these conflicts.

Tools

As mentioned earlier, the *Findings* are themselves a tool—a mediating symbol system for modeling, documenting and persuading. Of interest here is that the *Findings* also represent how thinking tools, technologies, and literate practices, such as training programs, actually work, revealing inner contradictions much as we saw in the *Findings*' representation of rules and power. This excerpt offers two snapshots of just such a conceptual tool (and great mediator of behavior), “on-the-job training.” Paragraphs 1-4 dramatize the on-your-own version. Here the learning process is initiated (and maintained) by the social skills of Melissa. It depends her ability to elicit and evaluate advice, while maintaining the good will and respect of those she

interrupts. Presented here as an activity, its internal conflicts and potentially disastrous outcomes are open to scrutiny.

An alternative representation of training is portrayed here as dedicated mentoring. This social tool for mediating the activity of employee and co-worker not only involves different practices and methods, but as the comments of the HR manager and welfare recipient suggest, such training carries strong symbolic significance. It replaces the “not our problem” representation of HR with a view that accepts “personal problems” as a problem of the larger workplace community as well. And paragraph 8 introduces a radical new priority that counters “work first” with “success first”—that is, this training would place value on making an insecure employee “look” and presumably feel strong. The *Findings* envision a workplace practice that articulates the place of motivation, compassion, and respect in low wage jobs.

This analysis suggests that the source of coherence in this knowledge building is not that of a thesis and its support or a conversational give and take. The hidden logic of this representation is the logic of a multi-voiced human activity which orchestrates the changing interplay of agents, objects of effort, and a community, with its rules, tools, and patterns of power.

Evaluating Knowledge Building

An intercultural dialogue can serve important social functions, but how do we evaluate the significance or quality of its knowledge building? The representation of the “Work Support” issue we saw in the *Findings* clearly differs from the kind of argument privileged in elite academic and public forums. By those criteria, we might value a Think Tank as a chance to hear and be heard with serious respect (a feature highly rated by participants) or as the experience of an energizing intercultural collaboration (missing from people’s public/professional lives). But we might dismiss the representation it creates as a rich but rather chaotic potpourri of ideas; an example of orality rather than literacy (Ong, 1983); a representation that has failed to reach the status of an autonomous, logically explicit, internally coherent text (Olson, 1988) and is unable function as a best-argument producing, warranted assent (Toulmin, 1969), or achieve the rational principle of non-contradiction (Jarratt, 1991). Using these criteria reflects a long-standing, Western (Platonic, Aristotelian, scientific) tradition of argumentation that seeks universals or at least abstract generalizations, and strives to achieve consensus and eliminate alternatives through the force of its reasoning and evidence.

These are not, however, the only criteria for judging a knowledge-building activity. A counter tradition exists, with parallels in the thinking of 5th century Greek sophists, modern pragmatism, feminist theory, and contemporary rhetoric. These fellow travelers argue for traditions of public discourse that are not defined by argumentation based primarily on causal logic, but that depend on narrative representations and emotion-evoking value judgments (Belenky, et al., 1997; Taylor, 1985). They value inquiries that exchange a quest for certainty with an experimental stance and a tolerance for diverse representations of reality (Dewey, 1988; West, 1989). Because this counter-tradition is seeking the basis for wise judgment and prudent action (rather than “Truth,”), it replaces global norms of rationality with local norms of reasonableness with which

culturally different groups (and beliefs) can agree (Haraway 1991; Hauser, 1999, Jarrett, 1991). It not only expands the list of what counts as “knowledge,” it puts knowledge building in the hands of ordinary people.

If the sophistic tradition justified a wider array of knowledge-making moves, activity theory, in league with American pragmatism, raises the bar for what counts as *significant* knowledge. As we noted earlier, in this tradition different ways of representing knowledge are valued as parts of a toolkit for knowledge creation (Engeström, 1999b, p. 385). But the more important recognition is that new knowledge is itself a tool, a mediational means, which is evaluated, not by its abstract rational structure or truth to nature, but by its consequences for human activity. The value of knowledge is its transformational power. In our intercultural context, with its deep-rooted cultural conflicts and history of social injustice, it is not enough for transformational knowledge to merely offer an alternative representation (e.g., a critique or a theory that asserts that it is a radical transformation of previous ways of thinking). Transformational knowledge is a change in the way people, their tools, and their worlds interact—a change in everyday practice itself.

A challenging if rather daunting set of criteria for transformational knowledge building in everyday settings is emerging from Engeström’s studies of courtrooms, medical clinics and work teams. The process he describes begins with “individual subjects questioning the accepted practice” (1999b, p.383) and ends when an “initial simple idea is transformed into a complex object, a new form of practice” (p. 382). People achieve consensus, not through the *force* of a general argument, but when the germ of an idea *ascends*, in an ironic turn of phrase, “from the abstract to the concrete,” and emerges as a coherent, workable action (p. 382, 401). The outcome of knowledge building then is the “creation of artifacts, production of novel social patterns, and expansive transformation of activity contexts” (1999a, p.27). These transformations are “expansive” because they draw people with rival perspectives into communication that lets them reconceptualize the ways they are organized and interacting around a shared concern (1997, p. 373). Within this multi-vocal event, they produce “a re-orchestration of those voices, of the different viewpoints and approaches of the various participants” (1999a, p. 35).

The implications of these criteria become even clearer when Engeström applies them to a familiar activity—the theory-building activity of researchers. The acid test of theory is its creative productivity—its “practical validity and relevance in interventions that aim at the construction of new models of activity.” But it is academic research with an added twist. These novel social artifacts and forms of practice are most significant when they are created “jointly with the local participants” (1999a, p.35). And when in doing so, they support the “possibility of human agency and transformation of social structures from below” (p.29).

Building Working Theories

If the criteria for activity-based knowledge building are demanding, they are also rather vague. What makes talk or text an effective mediational tool for the “transformation of social structures from below”? I will argue that one of the most significant outcomes of the dialogues we have observed is their capacity to build working theories of wise action, as a step toward action itself.

I use the term *working theory* to identify a representation or way of talking about a problem that has some special properties.

As a theory:

- The knowledge created by this event and its documentation is a self-conscious hypothesis, a current best interpretation of the problem at hand, aware that it must be always provisional, awaiting the revisions of experience.
- It acknowledges its place within a network of rival readings, of alternative hypotheses that may range from complementary aspects of an activity, to contradictory elements, to deeply competing premises or values.
- It seeks out such rivals not to eliminate them but to build a more fully negotiated meaning, which attempts to accommodate a more complex reality, in which multiple options are not mutually exclusive.
- And as an observation-based theory, it remains open to renegotiation, to restructuring its understanding

As a working theory:

- The *Findings* are first and foremost the representation of an activity—of how the agents, objects, and outcomes in a community interact with its rules, tools, and patterns of work and power. It is a theory of how things work. It represents that reality by dramatizing its critical features. E.g., The contradiction between professionalized HR guidance and individual worker empowerment emerges in the conflicting goals and the tacit values of worker and assigned “buddy.”
- A *working theory* is also a guide to participating in that activity in a new, more reflective “experimental” way. A problem-solving dialogue represents problems in terms of options for action. But the option of a “buddy system” is inevitably a decision to ignore other voices: Options need to come with trouble-shooting instructions. A working theory not only makes an idea operational, it reveals the conditions under which it might it might work out—or unravel. It previews possible outcomes and predictable problems. It creates a qualified claim that locates a idea or an option within the complexities and contradictions of a human activity. It prepares participants to act and adapt.

Conclusion

A community think tank is an attempt to articulate, in action, a working hypothesis about how to support intercultural inquiry. Analyzing this rhetorical event as a social cognitive activity suggests that, if knowledge building is our goal, we must meet the challenge of channeling competing discourses. Activity analysis lets us see how such a dialogue is not a conversational moment, but is a socially organized activity, spread over people, sites, texts, and time, that depends on multiple ways of representing its problem. Bringing the negotiations of actual meaning makers into the picture balances this account of selves and society. It shows how

entering in such a dialogue also depends on individual commitment to an intellectual stance. This stance becomes in essence a thinking tool that structures how partners interact and how they construct an understanding that complicates their own assertions, turns volatile issues into transformative comments, and builds a more qualified, conditionalized representation of the problem at hand.

Like the literate tools it describes, this activity analysis/chapter has been the means first, for examining and, one hopes, improving the practice of the dialogues themselves. Secondly, it has turned that experience into a sharable social artifact that might in its limited but concrete way change social practice. Finally, looking closely at these dialogues has also, I believe, contributed to the toolkit of activity theory. It suggests a way to evaluate knowledge-building by looking for the presence of working theories that can embody a complex human activity, scaffold an experimental stance, and support wise action within that activity.

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Notes

¹ “Dialogue developers” can operate in many places, as ordinary people initiating a needed dialogue in their community or work place, as faculty designing an outreach project with students, or as communication consultants working with businesses and non-profits.

² As Paul Prior (1998) suggests, tacit disciplinary assumptions often shape our judgment of what elements of an activity are important to analyze. Sociology or cultural theory, for instance, would put a priority on describing the system itself. This inquiry, guided by the goals of educational research and prophetic pragmatic rhetoric, asks, what can individual learners, writers, and everyday rhetors learn about how to thrive within an given activity or social system—and possibly to transform it.

³ As a new director of the Center, I also wanted give public shape to our vision of outreach as a collaboration (not just a contribution of university expertise) that resulted in building new problem solving and technological capacities in the community and new intercultural capacities in the university students and faculty. So we started with a public forum called Drawing on the Local: Carnegie Mellon and Community Expertise. A group of academic and civic leaders affiliated with the university (Shirley Brice Heath who had just received an honorary degree, a State Supreme Court Justice, an Urban League president and a Vice Provost) entered a structured dialogue with 200 people from the community in which we asked, how effectively does this university acknowledge and draw on community expertise, and how could we do it better? The answers suggested plenty of room to grow. (Cf., Flower and Heath, 2000; Flower, 1997)

⁴ An introduction to community problem solving dialogues (published as *Working Partners: An Urban Youth Report on Risk, Stress and Respect*) is available on the Community Think Tank site/Resources, (www.cmu.edu/thinktank) See also Flower, (in prep) for an analysis of a particular event.

⁵ The group referred to here as the Think Tank Team included Carnegie Mellon’s Center for University Outreach staff, Wayne Bradley Cobb (community education director), Susan Swan (research assistant), and Linda Flower (center director), generously aided by Wayne Peck, director of Pittsburgh’s Community House where most of the sessions were held. The process of facilitating and documenting this process was managed by the Center’s Think Tank team with the help a community planning group and college students.

⁶ The data for the *Findings* published from this Think Tank came from 6 sessions which typically involved 15-25 people (including a group of Community Fellows working as table leaders who often came to multiple sessions). A session with 200 participants described later in this paper suggested the potential of even larger group dialogues, but its data was not included.

⁷ See the *Findings* (eds L. Flower and S. Swan) p 2-3 for a review of the economic and social issues affecting low wage workers.

⁸ I am using the term “discourse” as a metaphor or shorthand, not for a linguistic entity that exists in an ideal form with actual “rules,” but for a set of very historically shaped set of literate practices (cf. Prior, 1998). The longhand version would talk about discourse in much the way cognitive psychologists talk about schema theory—people often act as if such structures existed.

⁹ I will return later to the possible outcomes of a Think Tank dialogue, but in this case it is instructive to note some of the dynamics of this student-initiated community/university project which we joined as consultants. Like most academic symposia, policy conferences, and public forums (and unlike a deliberative session charged with making decisions), its effects would be indirect and different for different participants. As many of the TANF recipients clearly communicated to us, the experience of being heard with such respect was the important and energizing outcome. (One job seeker in fact returned to organize a “local think tank” with her placement agency, persuading its director to draw staff, clients like herself, and the Carnegie Mellon Think Tank team into two additional dialogues.) The County Assistance director and researchers made it clear they were eager to see the information gathered by the graduate student recorders at each table—they clearly needed ideas, even if their powers were limited by the State. However, the event had been mounted at semester’s end as a class project by the public policy graduate students, and with the grand event accomplished (the necessary outcome for the students), the plans for documentation slowly slipped into the abyss of summer vacation.

¹⁰ For a detailed look at the steps a research team or the members of an outreach class would go through in organizing a Think Tank see www.cmu.edu/thinktank.

¹¹ It is important to note that, say, unlike a labor negotiation, the outcome of a Think Tank is not a contract or specific action, but a negotiated understanding of a dilemma and of multiple options for action. It is beyond the scope of this chapter or the Think Tank itself to track subsequent outcomes in participants’ varied workplaces, but the subsequent action of the Union leader here is revealing. He concluded that his own workplace needed to mount an inquiry into what the membership actually saw as problems (was it indeed racism, wages, promotion?). This led him to mount a series of local action think tanks (based on critical incidents his inquiry turned up) on the organization’s flawed promotion process and a discussion with a regional network of unions about building a new program for “mentoring our own” through the realities of the promotion process.

The outcomes of a “local action” think tank also appear to differ from typical labor/management discussions. In a second series of Think Tanks on “*Healthcare: The Dilemma or Teamwork, Time and Turnover*,” we are combining the more public “expert” dialogues with “local action” projects with senior care centers. Here we are seeing not only some impact on management actions, but perhaps even more importantly, some changes in ways the expertise of the nurses aides (the low paid, lowest-on-the-totem-pole staff) is attended to and in ways they feel their value is represented. These *Findings* are available on www.cmu.edu/thinktank.

¹² Readers of the *Findings* of a Think Tank may of course draw on this understanding as participants within another activity of their own, and then it is their understanding that would be relevant.