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This is the published version of a chapter published in *A Nordic perspective: on the cultural and the activity approach in theory and practice*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Mendonça, M., Popov, O. (2014)

A comparative analysis of university pedagogical centres' activities in Mozambique and Sweden.
In: Hans Knutagård, Britt Krantz och Marie Jedemark (ed.), *A Nordic perspective: on the cultural and the activity approach in theory and practice* (pp. 65-73). Kristianstad: Kristianstad University Press

Kristianstad University Press

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-93951>

A comparative analysis of university pedagogical centres' activities in Mozambique and Sweden

Abstract

Many universities around the globe consider raising the pedagogical competence of their teachers to be an important task. The common way of approaching this task is the creation within the university of a specialised centre in charge of staff pedagogical development. This study attempts to provide an analysis of activities conducted by two pedagogical centres situated in two dramatically different contexts: one of the poorest countries in the world (Mozambique) and one of the richest (Sweden). A qualitative study was carried out based on a comparative policy document analysis, on-site observations and semi-structured interviews with two staff members from both centres. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provided a theoretical framework for the analysis. The collective activity system is taken as a unit of analysis that connects psychological, cultural and contextual perspectives (Engeström, 1999). We found that the official rhetoric of both universities explicitly focuses on the development of pedagogical competence for all categories of teachers. Therefore, as was expected, similarities were identified in the object and expected outcomes of the centres' activity. However, due to significant differences in historical pre-conditions, cultural contexts and artefacts used for mediating activities in the two centres the findings revealed many differences in the corresponding collective activity systems. The study suggests that the implementation of pedagogical training at a university should carefully consider contextual, social and cultural factors shaping collective activity systems and if necessary construct compensatory artefacts to ameliorate possible frictions in the developmental process.

Key words: University teacher, pedagogical competence, activity theory, context

Introduction

The pedagogical education of university teachers has become common practice in many countries around the world (Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson, 2008). Quality development in higher education is linked to the quality of teaching and learning, which is connected to the teachers' acquisition of a higher level of pedagogical competence. Ryegård, Apelgren & Ols-

son (2010) define pedagogical competence as a continuous development of teaching and personal professional development, supporting and facilitating student learning in the best way. The focus of many pedagogical projects at university level is placed on teachers' pedagogical competence development.

However, different universities approach this issue in different ways. For example, it could be in the form of compulsory or voluntary attendance of pedagogical courses. According to Tågerud (2010) courses in the pedagogy of higher education are now offered by all Swedish universities. Many universities consider a ten-week course in higher education pedagogy compulsory for tenure track lecturers (Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson, 2008).

This study aims to examine how the development of teachers' pedagogical competence is framed and implemented in two universities located in two different contexts, i.e. Umeå University in Sweden and Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. At Umeå University the Centre for Teaching and Learning [Universitetspedagogiskt centrum] (UPC) provides pedagogical development activities. At the UEM the implementation of pedagogical education is carried out by the Academic Development Centre [Centro de Desenvolvimento Académico] (CDA).

In this study the following research questions were posed:

- What are the contextual preconditions at Umeå University and at UEM concerning the development of pedagogical competence?
- What are the similarities and differences between activities carried out at UPC and CDA?

This study brings into consideration issues related to the nature of social activities and the role of cultural context in shaping the development of teachers' pedagogical competence. In this regard, cultural and historical dimensions of development presented in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provide important insights for the analysis.

Theoretical framework

In Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, human activity development is conceptualised as a complex sociocultural and psychological process. According to Kaptelinin & Nardi (2012) Vygotsky defined the process of human development as the appearance of new functions and attributes that first emerge as distributed between individuals and their social environment (inter-psychological) and then become appropriated by individuals (intra-psychological). CHAT also suggests that the historical process of human development is based on active transformations of existing environments and the creation of new ones, through human labour in a collective and collaborative use of tools (Stetsenko & Arieivitch, 2004). CHAT sees human activities as products of their history and culture (Daniels, Lauder & Porter, 2009). Any developmental activity assumes participants to be active agents in collective practices, communities and institutions (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

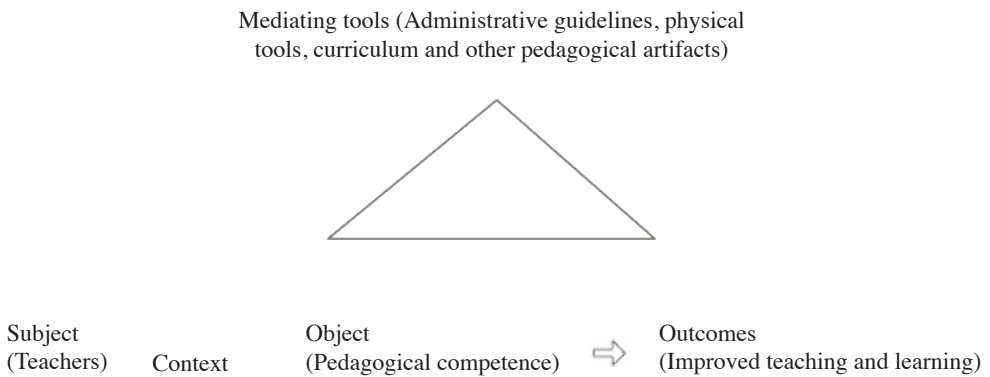
An activity is considered to be the key source of development of both the social practice/object and the subject. An analysis of activities therefore opens up the possibility to properly understand both subjects and objects, and technical tools as mediators changing the activity

(Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Logically, this also concerns educational activities. Gutiérrez (2002) suggests that educational practices, constituted through the junction of cultural artefacts, beliefs, values, and normative routines, can be described as an activity system. Following this line of thought, we assume that CHAT can contribute to understanding activities designed to develop teachers' pedagogical competence. In this study, the collective activities of pedagogical centres functioning in two different contexts are chosen as the units of analysis.

Accepting that an important role is played by the context in pedagogical development, Gutiérrez et al. (1999) make the inference in their research that contexts are characterized by conflicts, tensions and diversity. We will pay particular attention to these qualities of the context.

Figure 1 below shows the schematic structure of an activity adapted for the development of pedagogical competence. In particular, it highlights the influence of the context and mediating tools on activities in pedagogical centres.

Figure 1: Structure and context of the pedagogical development activity



In the figure above, the subject (teachers) need to develop their pedagogical competence (object) in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (outputs) through pedagogical courses supported by different means (mediating tools). According to Kaptelinin & Nardi (2006) mediating tools facilitate the coordination of individual contributions to collective activities and signify the social status and specific responsibilities of their owners.

Methods

A qualitative approach was carried out, based on a comparison of the official documents that guide and regulate the process of teaching and learning at Umeå University and UEM. Some documents were accessed online and the facilitators of the courses provided others. The main researcher (the first author) herself attended courses in both centres in order to gain better

understanding of the contents, methods and strategies used. Thus, notes were taken during the course, about aspects of interest.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two course leaders at UPC and CDA respectively. The interviews were carried out via Skype at UPC and face to face at CDA. Issues related to curriculum organization, activities developed, research, and future perspectives were approached. The selection of the respondents was done by convenience and length of their experience of working at the centres. The interviews lasted from 45 to 50 minutes. The answers were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The validation was done in two ways: for the group interviewed via Skype, the transcripts were sent by email for confirmation. For the other group, the interviewer and respondents listened together to the answers given and the correctness of the replies was confirmed. Ethical considerations were observed. All interviewees gave their permission to participate in the study as well as to use the information provided for research purpose.

These interviews complemented the data collected through the document analysis, which was done at two levels: the university and the centre. At the university level, official documents were compared in terms of the demands made for development of pedagogical competences, and how these competences were conceptualized and operationalized in both universities. At the level of the centres, we compared the curriculum documents describing the courses and contents offered as well as the course evaluation summaries. The latter was done only for two similar courses Assessment and Evaluation [UPC] and Students Assessment [CDA].

Governmental publications and official statistics provided the necessary background information for an understanding of the broader context. Through the comparison of official policy documents, we tried to see what is culturally specific and what are globally accepted trends. Also, following Schriewer (2000), we expected a comparative analysis of the official documents to provide evidences for causal explanatory arguments of the pedagogical centres' activities. The document analysis was done through consequent, iterative readings and comparison of the official texts and identification of common and different positions.

Findings

Two broader themes became evident during data analysis through the CHAT theoretical lens, namely, factors affecting the activities of the centres related to mediating tools and the context of activity. In relation to mediating tools, these are presented in two categories: Official documents as mediating tools and Pedagogical tools and methods. In relation to the second theme the following two categories were identified Administrative and organisational frames and Local contexts of the centres' activities.

Official documents as mediating tools

The analysis of official documents shows that both universities are concerned with teachers' pedagogical competence. For instance, according to the pedagogical action plan of Umeå University, pedagogical development must be systematically enforced in order to safeguard its position as one of Sweden's most attractive and strong providers of higher education (Umeå Universitet, 2009). Similarly, at UEM, official documents underline the importance of continuous, regular education and lecturers' pedagogical actualisation in order to assure the high quality of professionals (UEM, 2008).

At national level in Mozambique, the higher education law in its article 3g (Boletim da República, 2009) stresses the need for teachers and researchers' continuing education in order to respond to the needs of modern society. At the university level, the Operational Plan 2010-2014 (UEM, 2010) underlines the need for the definition of the profile of academic excellence. Further, the same document expects the creation of an instrument for teaching quality assessment at UEM. The Strategic Plan of UEM stresses the need to define "clear terms of reference" for a lecturer's activity and the lecturer's professional profile. However, the document also expresses concern that "the current professional career regulation does not explicitly identify connection between pedagogical competence and career in the academy" (UEM, 2008, pp. 21-22).

Further, we found that employment regulations at UEM do not clearly demand consideration of pedagogical skills. At Umeå University there are clear rules and guidelines for teacher employment at the University (Umeå Universitet, 2006a; Umeå Universitet, 2006b). Demonstration of teaching skills is a requirement for employment of all categories of teachers. Further, they should also take an introductory six-week course in higher education pedagogy and carry out a continuous compilation of their teaching portfolio.

A similar situation was found concerning the yearly evaluation of staff performance. In Umeå, pedagogical development, including attendance of UPC courses, is an important indicator of professional growth and normally even included as a criteria for individual salary setting by the departments. In Maputo, the Guidelines on assessment of teacher's and researcher's performance (UEM, 2005) does not mention participation in university pedagogy courses as an indicator for teacher's professional development during the year. Pedagogical courses are only requested when considering category promotion of junior teaching staff, for example, from probationers to assistant lecturers.

Thus, the official policy and guidelines in both universities provide facilitation for the activities of the pedagogical centres. However, in Umeå, we could find more concrete support for conducting staff pedagogical training than in Maputo.

Pedagogical tools and methods

Expectedly, a clear difference between the centres was identified in material facilities mediating pedagogical activities. CDA staff reported lack of classrooms, computers and out-of-

date library. At Umeå University, there is a specific room for UPC courses, with IT resources and an up-to-date library.

Related to the work methods, course participants in both centres appreciated interactive activities, like group work, discussions, group presentations and feedback from the facilitators. At UPC, participants requested more clear links in the discussions and presentations with the course literature. At CDA, participants were more focused on feedback from the facilitators for clarification of concepts, rather than references to the literature.

Course evaluations were used in both countries as mediators of learning. At UPC small evaluations were made after each day or after two days of the course. This elucidates the formative purpose of the course evaluation system used there – to continuously attune the activities of the course to participant needs. At CDA the evaluations were made at the end of the course aiming to improve the next course. The type and content of the evaluation questions used in both centres were rather similar – enquiring about participants' satisfaction and suggestions for improvement. The main differences were related to more clear focus at UPC on gender issues, information technologies (IT) and literature used in the course, themes which were not mentioned in CDA's evaluation instruments.

Administrative and organisational frames

The two centres clearly differ in relation to administrative placement and degree of academic freedom. UPC is a rather self-steering centre working in coordination with the Office for Human Resources [Personalenheten]. CDA belongs to the Faculty of Education without any financial or administrative autonomy and thoroughly controlled by the faculty. They also differ in the activity orientation of the centres. UPC's target group are teachers and administrators. CDA's target group are teachers and students.

In relation to the curriculum development of the centres, the findings showed some difference and some similarities. UPC delivers more than 20 courses, many of them ICT based, and provides diversified internal (within university) and external pedagogical consultancies. The current process of restructuring the courses at UPC is about reducing the number of courses, not the contents. This process has been initiated internally by UPC staff in order to optimise the curriculum. At CDA, the current restructuring of the courses has been instigated by central university administration. It prescribes an increased number of courses delivered from 4 to 14 in one year, most of them with new contents, but without any improvement of material conditions for the centre concerning, for instance, an information technology component.

Similarities were found in the contents of some courses and also the methods and strategies used in their implementation, for example, in the Assessment and Evaluation course [UPC] and the Students Assessment course [CDA]. Also, some similarities were found in the ways the courses are led and administrated. In general, all teachers at both centres can teach any scheduled course. There are two course leaders, a main and a co-facilitator. However,

at Umeå University the main course teacher is always from UPC. At CDA, with the current dramatic increase in the number of courses, the course leader can come from any faculty or department at the university. This poses, according to the interviewees, a challenge to the maintenance of the established interactive dialogical method of course delivery at CDA.

Regarding research activities, we found that at both centres few research articles are published yearly. This is done mainly by the staff members involved in PhD programmes. However, UPC organises an annual pedagogical research and development conference at the university, as part of its assignment, where proceedings are peer reviewed. Reports from the staff interviewed revealed that both centres wish to improve in this field.

The local contexts of the centres' activities

The findings showed significant differences concerning the conditions and socio-cultural contexts where the two centres function. One illustrative example of such differences is how university infrastructure supports the centres' activities. Libraries at Umeå University provide top world-class service for students and researchers. UEM has a modern library building but CDA cannot count on good service as the library services are minimally efficient. The same is true for the Internet connection, which is not reliable at UEM.

One important contextual factor for the pedagogical centres' activities is who attends the courses. In Umeå it is a rather broad audience that includes researchers, PhD students, senior and junior teaching staff from different faculties and centres. This opens an opportunity for multi-level exchange of experience and productive discussions. In Maputo, the major group of participants in CDA courses are junior teachers. Senior staff, particularly PhD holders, very seldom attend any CDA activities. This limits the learning opportunities during the group work.

Staff pedagogical education is aimed at supporting different kinds of academic practices at the university. At Umeå University this includes PhD supervision, on-campus and distance teaching, using traditional approaches and a variety of modern multimedia tools. Thus, UPC designs and provides a broad selection of courses to meet these needs. In Mozambique, teaching is the main activity of the university; it is done on-campus and with very limited technical possibilities for using the Internet and multimedia. This is what CDA activities are oriented towards – classroom teaching/learning with rather large groups of students.

Teaching at Swedish universities is normally done in both the Swedish and English languages and academic work in general is conducted in these two languages. Therefore, many of the UPC courses are also delivered in English and Swedish, because there are many international PhD students, teachers and researchers at the university. At UEM, Portuguese is the only language of instruction. All CDA activities are conducted in this language.

General ideological discourse in society always affects educational activities. In Sweden the dominating topics in the social sphere are gender and equality. UPC staff have to consider these issues when working with course curriculum. Course facilitators in Mozambique

unavoidably will consider issues of poverty and development which dominate discourse in the public sphere.

The economic situation at the university defines the possibilities for the competence development of the centres' staff. In Umeå every UPC staff member has 20% of their working time allocated for individual competence development. In Mozambique CDA teachers do not have time formally allocated for this purpose. They have to teach 100% if they are not involved in masters' studies or a PhD program abroad.

Discussion

The study focused on a comparative analysis of two university pedagogical centres' activities, one located in Mozambique and another in Sweden. We found that the official policy of both universities explicitly demands the development of pedagogical competence for all categories of teachers. Using the CHAT conceptual framework, we can say that similarities were identified in the Object and expected outcomes of both centres' activity (see figure 1). However, the results of the comparison revealed many differences in the collective activities of the university pedagogical centres. Our analysis suggests that reasons for these differences could be found, primarily, in the artefacts mediating the centres' activities and the contexts where the centres operate.

The study identified some clear tensions between mediating tools and the object of activity in the Mozambican context. The rhetoric of official documents is not supported by instrumental tools for the sustainable implementation of university pedagogy courses. This is in contrast to the situation in Sweden. Lindberg-Sand and Sonesson (2008) point out that in Sweden teaching competence is brought forward as a central aspect of quality programmes in higher education. Policy on the development of teachers' pedagogical competence is aligned with the regulations of teacher employment at the university. However, at UEM, novice teachers are not requested to show pedagogical skills for their employment. Policy and practice alignment is rather weak. This situation becomes understandable if we look at contextual pre-conditions. In Sweden, there is hard competition for any position available at the university. Therefore, it is possible to make sophisticated selection criteria, including the demonstration of pedagogical skills. On the contrary, in Mozambique, where availability of competent people for any position is very limited a selection is made primarily based on professional/subject knowledge.

CHAT emphasizes the role of mediation or "auxiliary stimulus" as extrinsic stimulus of human action that comes from outside in order to control the behaviour (Engeström, 1999, p. 29). In the case of UEM, the inclusion of a pedagogical dimension in the terms of reference for teachers' employment and in the regulations for annual assessment of teachers and researchers' performance could be such an "auxiliary stimulus" for pedagogical development.

CDA and UPC are influenced by the specific academic contexts they belong to but also exercise collective agency aiming to change these contexts. This is not a friction-free process, but the staff interviewed were still enthusiastic about their mission.

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