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Students' deviations from a learning task: An activity-theoretical analysis

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ABSTRACT

Students' interpretations of school tasks that deviate from teachers' intended assignments have seldom been the object of empirical analyses, though disregarding such interpretations can seriously hinder attempts to understand how students relate to assigned tasks. This study utilized the activity-theoretical concept of personal sense for disclosing students' deviations from an inquiry-learning task extending over seven lessons in a Finnish primary school classroom. The study suggests a multi-layered conceptualization of disruptive and productive deviations from the assigned task. The conceptualization focuses on students' connections to the broader contexts of the activities they inhabit and to the socio-emotional aspects of the task. The paper concludes with reflections about the pedagogical implications for supporting students to elaborate their personal sense of school tasks.

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1. Introduction

Students' interpretations of school tasks that deviate from teachers' intended assignments have seldom been the object of empirical analyses. Yet, a series of pioneering studies showed that disregarding these deviating interpretations can seriously hinder attempts to understand how students relate to assigned tasks (Halldén, 1982; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Säljö & Wyndhamn, 1993).

These studies indicated that institutional settings strongly influence how students interpret and accomplish tasks. Students interpret a task differently depending on whether it is presented in a school lesson, a one-to-one tutorial, or an after-school club (Newman et al., 1989) – or in a mathematics or social sciences lesson (Säljö & Wyndhamn, 1993). Additionally, students' interpretations of tasks can restrict their conceptual engagement. For example, upper secondary school students' interpretations of discovery learning tasks predominantly involved following procedures (Halldén, 1982). As a result, the students became more preoccupied with the way the school system works, rather than with the actual learning goals. Finally, these pioneering studies pointed at multiple student interpretations that did not correspond with the teacher's understanding of and intention for the tasks. For example, when fourth-grade students were tasked with mixing all possible pairings from a set of four chemicals, some engaged primarily in describing fascinating chemical reactions instead of finding the pairs (Newman et al., 1989). Thus, task instructions were not sufficient for a task to be performed as intended and often students were seen as “doing the task poorly”, when they [were] in fact not doing it at all” (Newman et al., 1989, p. 141).

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More recent studies have conceptualized students' interpretations of tasks with the help of the concept of framing (Engle, Nguyen, & Mendelson, 2011; Engle, 2006; Lantz-Anderson, Linderöth, & Säljö, 2009). While these studies help with the understanding of how students interpret core epistemic aspects of tasks, they do not specifically focus on the extent to which these interpretations deviate from the teachers' intentions and the important contextual and socio-emotional resources for learning involved in these deviations.

Our study utilized the activity-theoretical concept of personal sense in order to disclose students' deviations from an inquiry-learning task extending over a series of lessons in a primary school classroom in Finland. The study suggests a multi-layered conceptualization of deviations from the assigned task, which involve productive interpretive dynamics. While deviations can be seen as mere disruptions of engagement in the core epistemic aspects of a task, they can also be an entry into the ways in which students personally understand the task. By paying attention to students' personal sense of a task, we can gain insight into the connections the students make between the given task and the broader contexts and motives of the activities they inhabit, and into the socio-emotional aspects of a task.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent do students deviate from the teacher's intentions for the given task?
- How do deviations convey the personal sense students make of the given task?
- What contextual and socio-emotional resources for learning are mobilized through these deviations and through the elaboration of personal sense involved in them?

This paper begins by introducing the concept of personal sense as a lens to study students' interpretations of school tasks that deviate from teachers' intended assignments. We then present the design of the study and the task assigned to the students. A section devoted to the results follows, reporting a multi-layered conceptualization of the deviations observed in the study. We conclude by discussing the results and their contribution to research on students' task interpretations, and by elaborating on the pedagogical implications of these results.

2. Personal sense and deviations

Students interpret a task by developing their personal sense of it in the course of interactions with the teacher, the institutional context, the materials, and other students. A personal sense of a task, however, primarily resonates with the students' lives, connecting the task to their realities and relationships. When facing a school task, students largely rely on well-established meanings (Leont'ev, 1981). Meanings are generalized senses of ideas or concepts that comprise accumulated experiences in society and are independent of the students' lives. The curriculum, textbooks and the teacher's voice are key sources of such meanings.

However, subjectively, meanings exist only in relation to one's personal sense, and to fully engage with the meaning of a task, students have to develop their personal sense of it (Leont'ev, 1978). If the task does not resonate with students' lives, they probably interpret it as uninteresting, irrelevant, or even nonsensical. Such "senses . . . have lost their real life basis and for this reason sometimes agonizingly discredit themselves in the consciousness of the subject" (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 94). Students may thus perform poorly or disruptively if tasks are detached from their real life relevance. Ultimately, the elaboration of the personal sense of a task can be a laborious process for which material and social support is necessary (Sannino, 2008).

Elaboration of personal sense of a task is constrained and influenced by the social structure of school (Engeström, 1998). School activity is an object-oriented, collective, and systemic formation with internal structure and dynamics. Texts become the object of school activity when students merely reproduce them (Engeström, 1987). Consequently, tasks tend to be disconnected from students' experiences and knowledge outside the school and remain detached from their personal sense. A personal sense is genuinely nourished when the contents of learning become students' tools for orienting in the world.

Multiple scripts of actions and interpretive resources emerge and are played out in classrooms (Gutierrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1999). While the dominant *official script* governed by the teacher and the institutional setting defines what counts as knowledge, students also co-construct this knowledge. The primary emphasis on meanings inscribed in the teacher's speech, curriculum, and study materials often leads to students engaging in *parallel scripts*. These are deeply imbued with students' personal sense and highlight important connections between the epistemic aspects of the school tasks and students' lives outside of school. These parallel scripts, however, are often seen as disruptive deviations from the official script and are largely dismissed as marginal attempts to construct personal sense.

Moreover, the *motivational sphere* (Engeström, 1998) of the systemic organization of a school activity contributes to the ways in which students interpret tasks. The motivational sphere includes "grading and testing practices, patterning and punctuation of time, uses (not contents) of textbooks, bounding and use of the physical space, grouping of students, patterns of discipline and control, connections to the world outside the school, and the interaction among teachers as well as between teachers and parents" (Engeström, 1998, p. 76). Time, for instance, is standardized in weekly schedules, and activities happen in well-circumscribed spaces within specified time segments (Lemke, 2004). The motivational sphere is constitutive of students' educational experience and contributes to the ways in which students make sense of school tasks.

In short, students' interpretations of assigned school tasks are situated in and interact with the institutional context of a school activity as well as the multiple contexts of their lives. Deviations from the teachers' intended assignments can thus be depicted with a nested structure of layers of deviations, represented in Fig. 1.

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