



Transformative agency: The challenges of sustainability in a long chain of double stimulation



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ABSTRACT

The sustainability of innovations and transformations in organizations requires the participation and involvement of all parties. This paper addresses the question of the sustainability of participants' transformative agency in a work unit. The sustainability of transformative agency can easily be diminished by activities becoming routine-like after a formative intervention ends. However, can employees maintain and develop their transformative agency by sustaining the principle of double stimulation initially used in the formative intervention? In this paper a qualitative analysis of double stimulation and the method of analyzing discursive expressions of transformative agency are integrated to look at the sustainability of transformative agency. The double stimulation setting emerged as a process during which the employees constructed the first stimulus explicating the need for participatory development of their work activity. The second stimulus was constructed in a longitudinal process of designing a meeting practice with the help of material artifacts and instruments. The continuous use of the second stimulus enabled the sustainability of transformative agency. Based on our findings we suggest that it is possible to sustain transformative agency when employees, with the help of a durable yet flexible second stimulus, persistently keep identifying problems and constructing means to solve their problems after the formative intervention.

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1. Introduction

Transformative agency manifests itself when practitioners solve conflicts and disturbances during the development of their local activity and work practices. A Change Laboratory (CL) is an intervention method that supports the formation of the transformative agency of the participants (Engeström, 2007; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). Although the emergence of transformative agency in CL interventions has been examined (e.g., Engeström, 2011; Haapasaari, Engeström, & Kerosuo, 2014), its sustainability has not been studied. What happens to transformative agency after a Change Laboratory, when work practices are developed as part of people's daily work without the special support provided by an interventionist? In this study, the question of sustainability relates to long chains of double stimulation embedded in organizational activities. We examine the sustainability of transformative agency during the follow-up phase of a CL intervention, asking specifically how double stimulation can support the maintenance and evolution of transformative agency.

The CL intervention method is based on the principle of double stimulation developed by Vygotsky (1997a; for a reconstruction of Vygotsky's idea, see Sannino, 2014). In experimental studies, Vygotsky (1997a) used double stimulation in relatively restricted forms, as a method to investigate problem-solving process in relatively structured situations in which neutral second stimuli were turned into auxiliary means to solve a problem. Unlike Vygotsky's experiments, we apply the principle of double stimulation in the context

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of everyday work (also Engeström, Kajamaa & Nummijoki, 2015–in this issue). Also, while Vygotsky focused on the development of individuals, we take the collective perspective of a work group to examine double stimulation.

We conducted a CL intervention during the winter of 2010–2011 in a work unit at the Itella Corporation in Finland. Itella is a service company specializing in information and product flow management. The challenges the company and the employees have to meet include ever-tougher requirements for productivity and changes caused by the increasing role of e-commerce. The participants of the CL considered it an opportunity to participate in developing their work activity. During the CL they developed their current ways of working, activated former well-tried practices and invented totally new solutions. Examples of implementation included the introduction of a whiteboard to allow rapid exchange of information and the construction of solution diaries in order to share experiences in solving problematic cases at work (Haapasaari et al., 2014).

After the intensive intervention, we carried out a lengthy follow-up that extended over the course of one year. During the CL intervention, the members of the work unit had been able to contribute to changes at work and had created the competence to solve problems in challenging work situations. They learned to reflect on their work practices and problems and to resolve them by explicating new possibilities and envisioning new models of the activity. However, due to large-scale organizational changes in the corporation the employees feared that they would not be able to participate and develop their work practices in the future. A conflict of motives between the practitioners' desire to continue participating in their work development and the experienced pressure to focus on efficient execution of routines emerged when the resources of the outside interventionist were not anymore available.

We consider this conflict of motives as the central challenge and driving force for the continued development of work practices after the CL intervention had ended. In Fig. 1, we present our working hypothesis of the structure of double stimulation in our follow-up data. The vertical lightning-shaped arrow in Fig. 1 represents the conflict of motives. The experience and challenge of continuous development (the box on the left) represent the first stimulus explicated by the employees. We want to examine whether and in what ways the employees created and used a second stimulus to break out from the problematic situation when the return to routines was becoming a risk to the sustainability and nurturing of transformative agency. The possible second stimulus is depicted as a question mark in the box on the right in Fig. 1.

Our research questions are: (1) Did the employees construct a second stimulus and if they did, what was it and how was it used? (2) Was the employees' transformative agency sustained and if it was, can this be explained with the help of the principle of double stimulation? We use cultural–historical activity theory, especially the concepts of transformative agency and double stimulation, as our framework in the analysis.

In the following sections, we first present the conceptual framework of the study. We then describe the data and the methods of the analysis. After that, we present our findings concerning the research questions. Finally, we discuss our findings and present our conclusions about the sustainability of transformative agency in a long chain of double stimulation.

2. The theoretical framework of the study

The theoretical framework for studying the sustainability of transformative agency is based on cultural–historical activity theory. The central concepts of the study are transformative agency, double stimulation, agentive actions and sustainability.

Transformative agency has been defined as “breaking away from the given frame of action and taking the initiative to transform it” (Virkkunen, 2006, p. 49). This type of agency is thus manifested in examining conflicts, disturbances and contradictions in local activity and work practices, envisioning new developmental potential and taking actions to transform the activity. Transformative agency goes beyond the individual and situational events as it emerges and evolves in collective interaction over time (Engeström, Sannino, & Virkkunen, 2014).

The principle of double stimulation is foundational for interventions aimed at eliciting new, expansive forms of agency (Engeström, 2007). In Change Laboratory interventions, the participants are initially presented with evidence, often in the form of

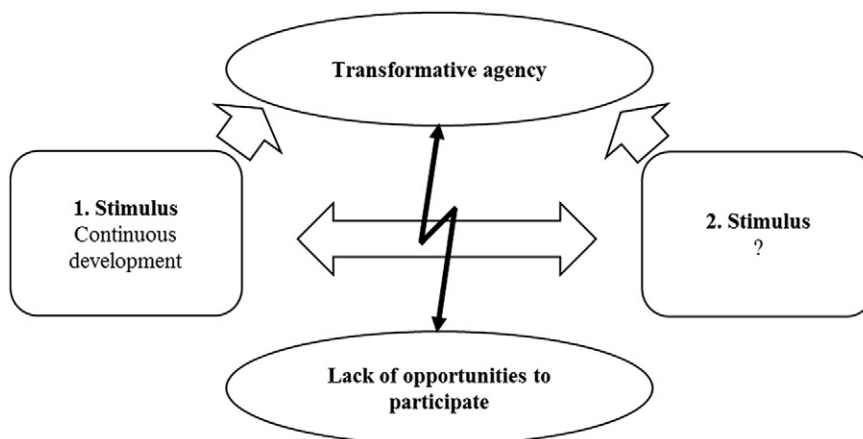


Fig. 1. The hypothesized structure of double stimulation in the meetings following the Change Laboratory intervention.

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