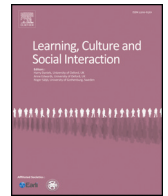




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## Learn or earn? Making sense of language teaching and learning at a Mexican University through a Change Laboratory intervention

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### ABSTRACT

The Change Laboratory methodology has already established itself as an effective tool to conduct practice-based interventions inspired by cultural-historical activity theory principles, but there may still be a need to use it in a wider range of cultural contexts and disciplines. This study reports on the implementation of a Change Laboratory intervention in foreign language education at a University in Central Mexico. It shows the validity of the methodology, contradictions affecting the learning and teaching activity systems, and possible joint resolutions. The results indicate that further work is required locally to achieve greater levels of social and personalized learning, and to increase language learning awareness.

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper the validity of the Change Laboratory methodology (Engeström, 2007, 2011; Virkkunen & Ahonen, 2011; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013) created by Yrjö Engeström and colleagues at the Centre for Research on Activity, Development and Learning (CRADLE) of the University of Helsinki (Finland) is put to the test in the context of developing new English language teaching and learning opportunities at the Division of Engineering (DICIS) of the University of Guanajuato (Mexico).

This Change Laboratory emerged from a previous (non-longitudinal) activity-theoretical study on online language learning conducted in the same research context between 2009 and 2012 (Montoro & Hampel, 2011, 2012). The study identified disturbances (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) affecting the three main activity systems (learning, teaching and institutional), speculated about cultural-historical trends and potential contradictions (Engeström, 1987) within and between the systems, and presented options to enable the free circulation of expansive learning actions (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The participants in the Change Laboratory, conducted in 2011–2012, further explored contradictions, this time longitudinally, and identified a shared object upon which learners and teachers could lay the foundations to build a new approach to language education in this local context.

### 2. Research focus

The Change Laboratory is a methodological tool derived from cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), which dates back to the work developed in the 1920s and 1930s in Russia by Vygotsky, Leontiev and a number of followers. Some key theoretical foundations underpinning this research method are the need for formative interventions to trigger developmental changes, the significance of

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mediation by means of cultural artefacts, and the social nature of learning and development. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, focusing on the potential of learners to advance in collaboration with others, is no less important.

Subsequently, Engeström's (1987) expansion of the theory into what is known as the theory of expansive learning brought emphasis to modelling activity systems and analyzing systemic contradictions and the external manifestations of these. Framing all these efforts within the so-called cycle of expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 8) is helpful to identify the various stages of modelling and analysis. In the latest version of activity theory, known as third generation activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 2000), particular attention is paid to clashes between different activity systems. Recently, interest has grown around using CHAT and the Change Laboratory methodology in schools (especially with a greater involvement of young students as participants) and drawing comparisons between Change Laboratories (including those conducted in developing countries) (Engeström, Sannino, & Virkkunen, 2014), and this paper may contribute to addressing both issues to some extent.

The need for culturally diverse studies in various disciplines makes the application of CHAT and the Change Laboratory in the context of language education at a higher education institution in the developing world valuable, because there are potential benefits involved in expanding the scope of the theory more widely. No reports of Change Laboratories involving language teaching and learning in higher education have been found in the literature. The closest studies of this kind have been reported in the field of teacher education (albeit not of higher education teachers) by Engeström, Engeström, and Suntio (2002), Sannino (2010), and Teräs and Lasonen (2012), and in vocational training by Morselli, Costa, and Margiotta (2014).

The experience and findings associated with this study are expected to feed back to the theory and perhaps contribute to strengthening and developing it further. This is particularly important in the case of CHAT, as the difficulties operationalizing the theory for practical purposes have been widely documented (Engeström, 1993; Mwanza, 2002; Nardi, 1996).

### 3. Research setting

This Change Laboratory was conducted at the Division of Engineering (DICIS) of the University of Guanajuato (Mexico). When the laboratory was conducted in 2011–2012, the school was offering undergraduate programs in Engineering, Business, Digital Arts and English Language Teaching, and four graduate programs in Engineering to approximately 2000 students, employing around 80 full-time teachers and 100 part-time teachers.

DICIS (formerly known as FIMEE), a high-achievers, research-oriented school, was created in 1964 to serve the needs of the oil refinery set up in the city in 1950 and more recently it has fed the demand for engineers generated by the growing industrial presence of multinational companies nearby.

Guanajuato is a fairly large (30,000 sq. km), fairly rural (30% of population live in rural areas) developing state of Mexico, whose economic system is still significantly dependent on agriculture, yet increasingly industrialized.

This industrialization is partly responsible for increasing the urgency to provide greater and more effective English language learning opportunities. A high population growth rate and low levels of education have also contributed to this urgency, but large class sizes and lack of physical space make it very difficult for the university to continue providing face-to-face English classes to all its students. Informed solutions are needed soon, and this Change Laboratory aimed to seek some.

All the academic programs offered at DICIS have an English language graduation requirement in the form of a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score equivalent to a lower-intermediate level of proficiency. In spite of infrastructural deficiencies and limited resources, the number of English language courses (all credit bearing but optional until December 2014) more than doubled between 2009 and 2013, going from six to 14 groups, involving six language teachers providing tuition to close to 300 hundred students. The methodology was communicative and the teachers were all non-native speakers. Compulsory self-access language centre use was introduced in language courses in 2011, and was still enforced by some of the teachers in 2012.

### 4. The Change Laboratory at DICIS

The Change Laboratory intervention conducted at DICIS (University of Guanajuato) started in August 2011 with institutional funding and support. Seven sessions (each lasting 112 min on average) were held between 2011 and 2012 involving a core of 11 participants, including teachers, coordinators, learners and the three members of the research team (the main researcher, a research assistant and a transcriber), who attended all the sessions. In addition, there were 17 guest participants (managers, psychologists, visiting professors, counterparts from other schools and self-access centre staff) who attended one or two sessions relevant to their position or expertise. The sessions featured video and textual stimuli to encourage discussion, and were video-recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

Prior to this, institutional documents were reviewed and various institutional representatives were interviewed, and the resulting data was used as part of the cultural-historical analysis of the institution conducted in the early stages of the Change Laboratory. Most of the institutional representatives interviewed later became core participants in the Change Laboratory sessions. The information gathered was used to provide stimuli in Change Laboratory sessions and to model the activity systems (learning and teaching). It also helped to provide a genesis of the tools that were discussed and considered for adoption.

Bearing in mind that traditional assessment and teaching and learning methods were identified as being core problems in the first session, in subsequent sessions a new approach to language education at the institution based on the concept of dynamic assessment (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011; Poehner, 2008) was proposed. It was felt that a third way such as dynamic assessment that could 'marry' traditional and static forms of assessment, on the one hand, and teaching and learning, on the other, was needed. The model was later

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