

An Investigation into the Contradictions in the Professional Learning Community of College EFL Teachers in the Form of Action Research: An Activity Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Teacher Professional Learning Community (PLC) has been proved an effective way to promote teacher knowledge, enhance teaching practice, and achieve better student learning outcomes. However, various levels of contradictions exist during sustaining and developing the PLC which impede the teacher's professional development. Using activity theory as theoretical schemata and activity systems analysis as a method, this paper explored the contradictions in the joint activity of a college English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher PLC in the form of action research. Three levels of contradictions were identified. The primary contradiction is one between the different value systems of the subjects, the secondary contradiction being one between the tool and outcome in the central action research activity system, and the third contradiction being one between the central activity system and the adjacent activity of teachers' daily teaching practice. The data indicated that the resolution of the contradictions via expansive learning could contribute to the development of the PLC. The findings may provide implications for the effective in-service teacher education of college EFL teachers.

Keywords

Contradictions, Professional learning communities, Activity theory, TBLT, Expansive learning, Teacher professional development.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been a shift from the positivistic paradigm to an interpretative and situated paradigm in second language teacher education (Johnson, 2006), suggesting that teacher learning is a socially negotiated and dialogic process. With this fundamental shift of paradigm, the traditional one-shot workshop to transmit knowledge and skills to teachers by external experts has been replaced by continuing learning in which teachers strengthen their knowledge and skills by collaborative inquiry (Stoll et al., 2006). Aligning with this, PLCs have gained momentum as a model of teacher education. A great deal of literature has been focusing on the nature and impacts of PLCs, which plays an important role in improving teaching quality and enhancing student learning (Bullough, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). However, scarce study deals with the contradictions during sustaining and developing the PLC. To address this issue, this study examined multi-layer contradictions during the development of a PLC of college EFL teachers in the form of action research and how participants of the community tackled these conflicts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 PLCs

Literature is replete with articles that deal with the nature and characteristics of PLCs. Summarizing various definitions from researchers, Hord (1997) defined PLC as one: in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit. (p. 1)

Though there has not yet been a universal consensus on the definition of PLCs among scholars, some of the essential characteristics summarized by Newmann et al. (1996) may shed light on its nature which distinguishes it from other forms of teacher collaboration. First, PLCs affords teachers questioning and developing their knowledge about "curriculum, instruction, and student development" by means of reflective dialogue (Newmann et al., 1996, p. 182). A second essential trait is the deprivatized practice of teaching as a result of the teachers' mutual observation and discussion of lessons taught in the class. The third characteristic is its emphasis on collaboration which guarantees a high-quality education. The fourth key element is the norm control of a focus on student learning. Additionally, some other important features of PLCs include school culture identification and the norm that new members need to experience several stages to adapt to the rules of community (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995). In line with the above characteristics, Bolam et al. (2005) interpreted PLCs as a community of inquiry "with the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals with the collective purpose of enhancing student learning" (p. 145).

The empirical studies of PLCs mainly elaborate on its positive impacts on teacher professional development, student learning outcome, and school culture (Bullough, 2007; Tam, 2014; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). For example, Vescio, Ross, & Adams (2008) concluded that PLCs contributed to both teaching practice and student achievement based on the review of 11 studies. For one thing, PLCs strengthened learner-centered teaching philosophy by affording an environment of teacher empowerment and continuous learning. For another thing, students' achievement gained as a result of teachers' participation in PLCs. In another longitudinal four-year study, Tam (2014) found that PLCs could transform the deep-rooted beliefs and practices of teachers which aims to promote school-based curriculum development. Furthermore, the finding demonstrated that teacher change consisted of five perspectives including course design, curriculum instruction, student learning, the role of teacher, and the competence of learning to teach. (Hairon & Tan, 2016; Hung & Yeh, 2013; Tam, 2014)

A growing body of research has been focusing on the practices and impacts of PLCs endemic to Asian Contexts (Hairon & Tan, 2016; Hung & Yeh, 2013; Wen & Zhang, 2019). For example, Hairon & Tan (2016) identified the five fronts which contributed to the attractiveness of PLCs in the centralized education systems of Shanghai and Singapore. They were revealed as a focus on student learning, the job-embedded nature, continual teacher learning, rigor in the development of knowledge, and the potential to change school culture. Hung & Yeh (2013) explored a teacher study group aiming to promote classroom-level curriculum reform within a Taiwanese context and found that the value of practical knowledge grounded in their contexts is essential to teacher development. Shi & Yang (2014) investigated the collective lesson-planning conference for EFL teachers in a college in mainland China and found that it was not only a joint enterprise to motivate teacher learning, but also a contact zone of relationships where teachers with unequal statuses and experiences worked together. Besides, Wen & Zhang (2019) identified the "pull-push" mechanism as a key element in sustaining and developing inter-university and inter-departmental EFL PLCs. These studies contributed to our knowledge about the essence and dynamics of effective PLCs in different socio-cultural situations.

However, the development of the PLC is not a once for all shot, and various layers of contradictions exist which will impede the success of the collaboration. For example, different value systems and lack of collective objects among community members may constrain cooperation, leading to predicament in sustaining and developing PLCs. To recognize and resolve these tensions will help optimize opportunities for teacher learning and establish a culture of teacher inquiry (Snow-Gerono,

2005). Unfortunately, scarce research probes into the examining and tackling of these contradictions in teacher PLCs. Therefore, this article seeks to address this need by exploring the different levels of contradictions and the process of resolving them during the development of a teacher PLC of college EFL teachers.

2.2 Activity Theory and Activity Systems Analysis

To examine the contradictions in the development of a PLC, this study draws on the principles of Activity Theory. The notion of goal-oriented “activity” as mediation of the individual by means of concepts and cultural entity originated from Vygotsky, who proposed that the basic unit of analysis of human higher cognitive development should be the activity itself (Vygotsky, 1978). The first generation of activity theory includes the basic triangle of the subject, object, and tool, whose essence is its capacity for changing the original situation into something qualitatively new. Leont’ev (1981) developed the theory and highlighted “activity” as the dominant analytical framework of human development, with the proposal of the taxonomy of activity types including activity, action, and operation. Engeström (1987) expanded Vygotsky and Leont’ev’s work by incorporating three elements as community, rules, and division of labor to identify the process of a collective activity system (see figure 1). Based on the possibility of the same subject engaging in different activity systems, Engeström further extended the model and introduced the third generation activity theory in which the minimum unit of analysis is two interacting activity systems. The third generation activity theory represents the multivocality and multiplicity of perspectives of activity under investigation. According to Engeström (1993), the activity system is not a static complex, but a “creative, novelty-producing formation” (p. 68). Central to this creative formation is the significant role of contradictions and the expansive transformation it entails. It is the interaction between elements and contradictions inherent within and between the activity systems that provide conditions for transformation and development (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In other words, contradictions are regarded as sources of innovation that would create new patterns of activity (Engeström, 2001).

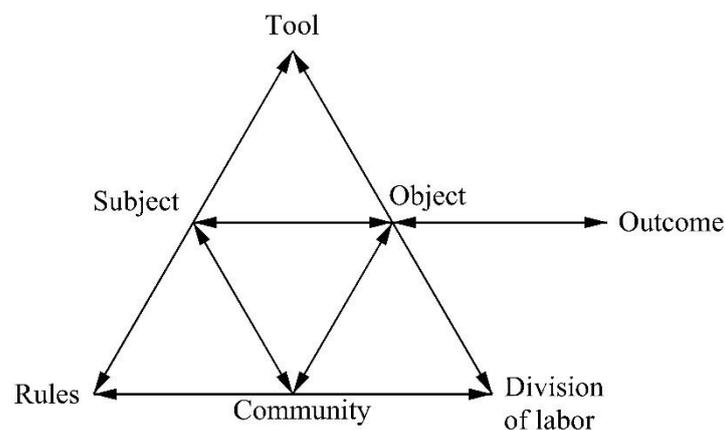


Figure 1 model of the second-generation activity theory (Engeström, 1987)

Activity systems analysis can be applied to identify these contradictions and to offer interventions to trigger change and innovation. An expansive cycle is established through identifying and resolving contradictions which include several innovative steps as questioning, analysis, modeling the new solution, examining the new model, implementing the new model, reflecting on the process, and consolidating the new practice (Engeström, 2001). New forms of knowledge and new patterns of activity will be generated through the continuous resolution of various levels of contradictions.

A growing body of research has been applying activity systems analysis in exploring the contradictions endemic in language teacher learning and development in various sociocultural contexts. For example, Tusi & Law (2007) explored a school-university partnership in Hong Kong in which the participants resolved contradictions by crossing the boundaries and transformed the object of the activity from helping novice teachers learn to the continuous development of both novice and experienced teachers. Yamagata-Lynch (2010) identified contradictions in the objects between individual teacher activity and institution school/university activities from teachers' perspective which inhibited teachers from improving curricular-based practices. Tasker (2011) examined how in-service English teachers in Czech transformed their beliefs by tackling the contradiction between teacher instruction and student learning when engaged in a lesson study group. He & Lin (2013) analyzed and defined the role of contradictions in the school-university partnership as a driving force of change which contributed to the transformation of identities of English teachers during practicum in mainland China. Yan & Yang (2019) explored various levels of contradictions emerging in a university-district-school partnership focusing on implementing the English curriculum innovation and the strategic actions resolving them.

However, the above studies mainly focused on contradictions that provide conditions for professional learning and transformation of individual teachers and teacher educators. Furthermore, most research has been conducted in the contexts of university-school partnership, where compulsory school teachers are the main subjects for teacher learning. Further research is needed to explore the existing contradictions which provide affordances for the development and transformation of a collaborative college teacher PLC. Therefore, this study examined the various levels of contradictions during the development of a college EFL action research PLC by drawing on activity theory. Adopting a longitudinal case study approach (Merriam, 1998), this study intended to answer the following research questions:

1. What contradictions (if any) were generated in the development of a college EFL teacher action research PLC?
2. How were these contradictions resolved and what were the impacts on the development of the PLC?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context and participants

To meet the challenges of English language education in the New Era, China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) was issued in 2018 which provides references for the cultivation of English language talents at different levels (Liu, 2019). College English language curriculum innovation based on CSE encourages student-centered, use-oriented, and competency-based language teaching, which deviates from the traditional teacher-centered and exam-oriented teaching method. This new mode of teaching has posed various challenges for teachers and the top-down conceptualization of the new teaching principles made it difficult for teachers to implement them at classroom levels. As indicated by a growing body of research, involving teachers in researching in their teaching context can improve teaching and learning at classroom levels (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Lieberman, 1995). In this regard, an action research PLC was set up in a university featuring foreign language education in the city of Hangzhou to empower teachers to take the initiative to examine and solve the curricular-based problems as teacher-researchers.

The whole action research PLC was divided into several sub-PLCs according to different action research themes, for example, classroom evaluation, oral presentation, classroom environment, student cooperation, and so on. The participants in this study is a sub action research PLC targeting at Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). This PLC comprised one expert researcher, one administrative teacher from the department of teacher development, and five in-service college EFL teachers. These five EFL teachers are all lecturers of courses like *Communicative English*, *Intensive English*, and *Intercultural Communication*. Among them, two were novice teachers, two experienced teachers, and one expert teacher. All participants voluntarily chose to take part in this research.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

This study took a longitudinal case study approach (Merriam, 1998). Various sources of data were collected during one and a half academic year, including interviews, observations, and related documents as shown in table 1. These multiple sources of data not only allowed for in-depth analysis and understanding of the evolving PLC but also data triangulation during analysis to ensure reliability.

Table 1 Sources of data collection

Method	Data Collection
Semi-structured interviews	Formal semi-structured interviews with the expert researcher for three times, 1.5-2 hours each, audio-recorded and transcribed
Informal interaction	E-mails, QQ records, phone calls and face to face informal interactions with participating teachers, recorded in the researcher journals
Participatory observations	Participated in and observed the PLC activities for 14 times, each for 2-3 hours, videotaped and recorded in the researcher journals and field observation notes
Documents	Papers and research reports from expert researchers, reflective journals from participating teachers and researcher journals, observation field records from the researcher

The goal of data analysis was to report on findings of contradictions represented in various sources of data. We first of all categorized and named the transcripts, uploading them into Nvivo, the qualitative research software. We then repeatedly read through the data and figured out the recurrent themes. All data were coded and categorized in an iterative manner. We summarized the contradictions within the central activity system and between different activity systems by reviewing the themes. The analysis will be checked by another researcher for reliability.

4. Findings and discussion

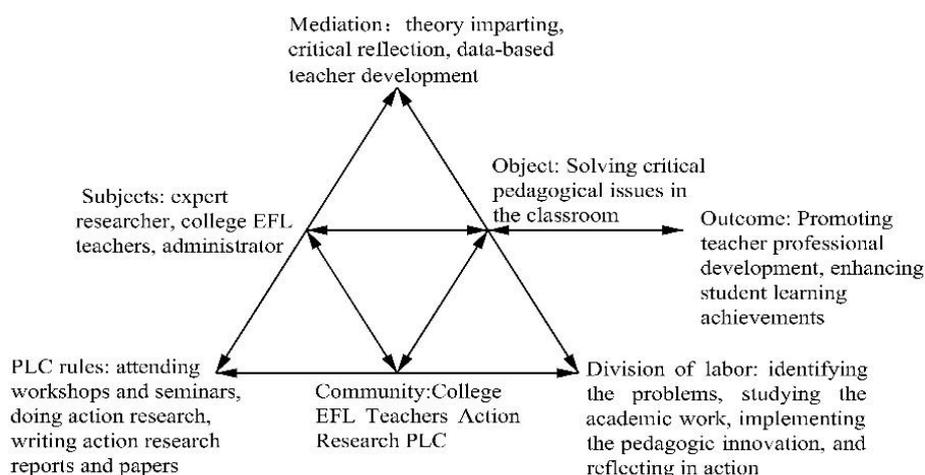


Figure 2 the college EFL teachers action research PLC

Through collaboration and negotiation, the expert researcher, college EFL teachers, and the administrator who originally belonged to different activity systems extended their activities and formed a new activity system (see figure 2). The development and transformation of this teacher PLC

in the form of action research is an expansive learning process driven by three levels of contradictions. The primary one is the inner contradiction between foreign language teachers and research experts. The secondary contradiction is one between the mediating tool of central activity and the object of improving curricular-based practice. And the last one is between the activity system of action research and its adjacent system of daily teaching practice. Effective strategic actions like observation, reflection, analysis, and establishing a new model were implemented to tackle these contradictions. The emergence and resolution of the contradictions will be described and discussed respectively in the following part.

4.1 The primary contradiction and its resolution

As a research expert in the teaching pedagogy of TBLT, Professor Liu illustrated the guiding principles and features of TBLT based on Ellis (2003, 2009) to the participating teachers in the first action research workshop. She recommended the enactment of TBLT as an action plan in the *Intensive English* and *Communicative English* class to motivate students' interest and enhance better learning outcomes. She explained:

Different from the traditional method, in TBLT tasks played a significant role in engaging learners to achieve the non-linguistic outcome of the activity by using the target language. We teachers only play a significant role of a guide or facilitator in the process. TBLT is in congruent with our curriculum innovation.

In the meantime, Teacher Lu who has taught for nearly thirty years questioned the feasibility of TBLT in the *Intensive English* course by pointing out that explicit grammar instruction and vocabulary explanation is an indispensable part of the class to ensure students' passing rate of College English Test Band 4 and 6. Teacher Chen also expressed her doubts by commenting :

How can we ensure students' accuracy and complexity of their spoken English if we merely act as facilitators instead of instructors? Students in my classes are lacking vocabulary and grammar knowledge. They don't possess sufficient linguistic resources to finish the tasks. TBLT merely is only suitable for proficient language learners, but what about beginners?

Obviously, the expert researcher and participating teachers held different teaching philosophies on operationalizing and implementing TBLT at the classroom level. The first level of contradiction emerged due to the different value systems among the subjects.

Confronted with this tension, Professor Liu didn't blame the teachers for their reservation but questioned herself: how to integrate grammatical knowledge into TBLT in a real classroom context? Bearing this question in mind, she repeatedly resorted to the academic works of TBLT and observed teachers' classes. After two weeks of classroom observation, she found out that instead of the strong TBLT proposed by Ellis which places exclusive emphasis on tasks, a weaker form of TBLT proposed by Skehan (1996) and Willis (1996) may be better suitable for the learning environment featured by a large number of students with different levels of English proficiency. Meanwhile, Professor Liu uploaded the relevant papers and books in the WeChat group for teachers to refer to. During the second action plan discussion, as the leading expert, Professor Liu recommended the pre-task/during-task/post-task model (Skehan, 1996) in which teachers could pre-teach the formulaic expressions needed for task execution and explicitly focus on language forms noticed by students themselves during task performance. This proposal as the initial action plan was readily accepted by the teachers. Teacher Wang went on to speculate that "I think this method can provide scaffolding to different levels of students, especially to those beginners." Teacher Chen concurred on this point by adding: "the mere task performance is not enough, the co-construction of knowledge between students and teacher in the pre and after task cycle is really important, and I really appreciate Professor Liu's work."

According to Borg (2003), prior language learning experience, teacher education, and classroom practice all impact teacher cognition. The expert researcher is armed with the latest research-based theories, while teachers are exposed to the challenging and innovative classroom contexts, which leads to their different beliefs and initial disagreement on the action plan. Through questioning,

observation, and dialogue, the expert researcher and teachers tackled the contradiction and reached a consensus on the framework. The expert researcher enhanced her communication skill by creating the three-dimensional dialogue with teachers, the classroom context, and herself and in the meantime improved her expertise of relating theory to practice.

4.2 The secondary contradiction and its resolution

To better equip teachers with the conceptual framework of TBLT, the administrator staff invited Professor Liu and other renowned experts in this field to give a series of academic lectures. The topics were decided by the experts and covered a wide range, for example, paper writing and publishing, how to do action research, designing tasks, and so on. Data from teacher interviews and informal interactions indicated that though teachers were enthusiastically embracing the principles of TBLT in the curriculum innovation, they still found it challenging to put it into practice due to contextual constraints. As Teacher Wang put it, "In this transitional period from the traditional pedagogy to the TBLT, we sometimes feel confused and need timely guidance from experts on our steps of teaching, to help us improve our curricular-based practices". In other words, the tool of imparting theory by experts is not sufficient for teachers to internalize these theories and transfer them into practical knowledge. And the second contradiction between the tool of imparting theory and the object of curricular-based improvements emerged.

Having received the teachers' feedback, Professor Liu then realized that teachers should be reflective practitioners instead of passive receptacles of knowledge. In the following workshop, she put forward the mediating tool of data-based teacher development which emphasizes teachers' reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schon, 1984). Teacher Chen who has won several awards in teaching competition volunteered to have her lessons recorded as an example for plenary teacher learning. During the discussion part the next week, the video-recordings of Teacher Chen's lesson of Unit 1 were presented and teachers were asked to comment on the designing of tasks, the sequencing of tasks, and measure the features of tasks in Teacher Chen's case against Ellis (2009) and other definitions (e.g., Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Willis & Willis, 2007) to find out any discrepancies. Then teachers had a discussion of why the divergence exists and the specific contextual reasons for it, followed by Teacher Chen's explanations. Other important parts like the participatory structure of the Teacher Chen's lesson (pair work) and evaluation form (teacher feedback plus peer evaluation) were also noticed and discussed heatedly by the teachers. Then Professor Liu encouraged the teachers to give their frank comments on the weakness of Teacher Chen's lesson as well as their strategic suggestions. In addition, this lesson discussion extended teachers' analysis to further reflect on their lessons, as Teacher Xie further illustrated, "Teacher Chen's lesson leads me to have a deep reflection on my classroom instruction, how I designed the tasks and interacted with my students. I think I have a lot to improve from this discussion."

Through the new mediating tool of data-based teacher development, the second contradiction between the tool and the object was resolved. Via observation and reflection, teachers identified the problem in their lessons, worked out the conceptual framework, and designed the plans to solve the problem. Teachers' competence in teaching, reflection, collaboration, and research was strengthened in the meantime.

4.3 The third contradiction and its resolution

The third contradiction emerged between the central activity system of PLC and its adjacent activity system of teachers' daily teaching practice. Participants of the PLC needed to adhere to the rules and regulations of the intensive teacher professional development programs. Those rules included attending workshops and lectures, implementing the action research plans, finishing teachers' reflective journals, action research reports, and each group co-authoring and publishing a book finally. These new responsibilities imposed on teachers brought hardship for them to handle other daily teaching responsibilities. For example, since the materials in textbooks were outdated, teachers were responsible for designing the tasks that on the one hand met the situational or interactional authenticity requirements and on the other hand in accord with students' majors and interests. This

preparation process for action research is time-consuming and made it difficult for teachers to maneuver the responsibilities of other courses in their daily teaching routine. In Teacher Tao's case, as course coordinator of Communicative English, he needed to prepare the MOOCs and edited online and offline resources of the course to meet the urgent calls of the project of establishing university-based outstanding online courses. Developing new teaching materials and writing reports for the action research added extra burdens on his limited time for the construction of the online course.

Besides, conflicts emerged when some teachers decided to change their extant teaching practice by applying the innovation, while others worried about the fact that innovations introduced at the action research project may bring a complete overhaul of their current teaching and evaluation systems. As Teacher Xie expressed her doubts, "If we completely apply the new teaching practice in all courses, what about the commensurate assessment system?"

Faced with this contradiction, the administrative leaders of the PLC took a series of actions. Adapting the identity from leaders to facilitators under the emotional and cognitive mechanism of "push and pull" (Wen, 2019), they nominated one teacher as a group leader in each action research group and empowered teachers by giving them equality to freely express their thoughts. Under this new mechanism, the group members could negotiate the date, content, and form of the PLC activities as well as submission dates of the required documents such as action research reports. For example, online discussions on Dingding and WeChat were applied, catering to different teachers' schedules. As a result, teachers could dynamically balance their teaching routine with the PLC activities by promoting teacher autonomy, with better teaching practice and fruitful academic productions. This is Teacher Wang's thoughts after she attended the paper revising seminar:

The three-hour discussion of Teacher Li's action research paper is absolutely meaningful. I didn't expect I could learn so much, and I have revised the logical framework of my ongoing paper after the expert analyzed Teacher Li's paper. The conceptual framework really applies! I'm already looking forward to the next seminar.

Besides this, the administrators from the university launched a project to encourage teachers to apply the innovation of the PLC to daily courses. Meanwhile, timely guidance from the experts was offered through face-to-face discussion or online interaction. By modeling a new PLC working mechanism, the third contradiction was resolved, forging the overall development of the PLC.

Seen from the above, the development of the college EFL teacher action research PLC is a collective "expansive learning" process driven by the contradictions. Different from the community of practice put forward by Lave & Wenger (1991), where the essence of learning is the individual's participation and interaction with the environment, with a focus on the heritage of knowledge and practice, the expansive learning put forward by Engeström (2001) emphasizes innovation and transformation. In this learning cycle, the subjects of study changed from individuals to collective and organizational networks. When two or more activity systems interact, the boundary zone has the potential to trigger innovation and generate new forms of knowledge. In this study, the traditional transmission of knowledge and individual learning were challenged, whereas the expansive process of the activity became the focus.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on activity theory, this study described and analyzed the contradictions confronted by a college EFL teacher action research PLC and how the PLC members tackled the contradictions by expansive learning. First of all, the expansive learning cycle has significant implications for understanding foreign language teacher education. Teacher PLC does not exist to impart or inherit knowledge and skills. It is whether the teachers could face the complexity and uncertainty of the learning process, and how the community members cooperate to change the situation and generate new knowledge that matter. Secondly, the identification and analysis of the contradictions faced by the college EFL teacher PLC could help researchers clarify the factors influencing the teacher collaboration programs individually and institutionally, providing implications for nurturing future

teacher PLCs. Thirdly, this study demonstrated the value of activity systems analysis in the research of foreign language teacher education. This method provides the basic analysis unit and academic discourse for describing teacher learning activities in multiple sociocultural contexts. However, every method has its limitations. The triad formulization of activity systems analysis cannot capture the dynamics and complexity of activities in real-world contexts. Researchers should focus on the identification, description, and summarization of activities and their transformation related to the research questions.

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