

# Report on the First International Course for Students on Activity Theory and Formative Interventions within the Helsinki Summer School

**M. A. Safronova**

PhD, Researcher at the Laboratory on Theoretical and Experimental Problems of Cultural-Historical Psychology at the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education

mariasaf@gmail.com

The Helsinki Summer School (<http://www.helsinkisummerschool.fi>) is a traditional international academic event organised every August by the universities in the Helsinki area. XI Annual HSS was held from 03 to 19 August 2010. The HSS offered 18 courses. More than 400 participants attended the HSS, including BA, MA, PhD students from 50 countries.

The Center for Research on Activity, Development, and Learning, CRADLE in the Institute of Behavioural Sciences at the Helsinki University started a course “Activity Theory and Formative Interventions”. The supervisor of this first course was Professor Yrjö Engeström, Director of the CRADLE, and the course coordinator was Annalisa Sannino, PhD, University Lecturer in the Institute.

Students of this group included 16 participants from nine countries (Austria, China, Finland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, Russia and Turkey). It was an interdisciplinary study group. The participant’s background was different and ran in such spheres as philosophy, psychology, education, social support of motherhood, information and communication technologies in education and work, design and visualization, agriculture, consulting, human resource management. And they had one shared interest – studying the potential of activity theory in its application to real practical issues in these areas of activity.



XI Annual Helsinki Summer School,  
03–19 August 2010



Activity Theory and Formative Interventions  
Course in the Center for Research on Activity,  
Development, and Learning, Helsinki University,  
Finland, 2010

During the training students got acquainted with basic concepts and the methods of the Y. Engeström’s activity theory and studied the applied projects in different practices, such as education, health, industrial hygiene, consulting and the organizations like a post office, an airport, a bank and a library.

Classes were going dynamically. The traditional lectures, seminars, discussions, case study, videoconferencing and final assignment were carried out together with individual and group

consultations and presentations, email-feedback and answering questions session. Students had the opportunity to take part in a laboratory experiment and two discussion sessions on the Change Laboratory method.

The main concepts of the Engeström's activity theory were studied during this course:

- the expansive learning (Engeström, 1987),
- the cycle of expansive transition, the cycle of expansive learning and the double bind (Engeström, 1987),
- the structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987),
- the object, the shared object, the runaway object (Engeström, 2009),
- the boundary crossing (Kerosuo & Engeström, 2003),
- the co-configuration (Engeström, 2004),
- the knotworking (Engeström, 2008).

CRADLE's professors and researchers, K.Launis, H.Ahonen, J.Pihlaja, J.Hautamäki, K.Kuutti, R.Miettinen and their close colleagues Roger Säljö (Sweden) presented the current and already implemented projects in Finland. Also, videoconferences were held: with F.Blackler (UK) on cultural-historical activity theory and organizational studies and with M.Cole (USA) on the concept of development in cultural-historical activity theory (vertical and horizontal development).

General method of the Engeström's activity theory was being developed since the middle 1990's under the name of the *Change Laboratory*.

The first description and analysis of the method application were conducted on the material of post service in Finland (Pihlaja, 2005). The Change Laboratory's toolkit includes the following variations of the general method:

- Culture Laboratory (Teräs, 2007),
- Competence Laboratory (Ahonen, 2008),
- Boundary Crossing Laboratory (Engeström, 2001, JEW),
- Implementation Laboratory (Kerosuo, 2006).

We believe that a possibility of application of this psychological method to organization activity analysis and conducting cultural-historical studies of human activities is a distinctive feature of the Change Laboratory method.

Information about the course in 2011 could be found at the Helsinki Summer School webpage [http://www.helsinki summerschool.fi/home/courses/activity\\_theory\\_and\\_formative\\_interventions](http://www.helsinki summerschool.fi/home/courses/activity_theory_and_formative_interventions)

## REFERENCES

Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.

Engeström, Y. (2004). New forms of learning in co-configuration work. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16, 1–21.

Engeström, Y. (2008). *From teams to knots: Activity-theoretical studies of collaboration and learning at work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y. (2009). The future of activity theory: A rough draft. In A. Sannino, H. Daniels & K. D. Gutiérrez (Eds.), *Learning and expanding with activity theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (pp. 303–328).

Kerosuo, H. & Engeström, Y. (2003). Boundary crossing and learning in creation of new work practice. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 15, 345–351.

Sannino, A., Daniels, H. & Gutierrez, K. (Eds.) (2009). *Learning and expanding with activity theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.