

Characterizing Stakeholder Change Agency During Expansive Learning Processes

Susannah C. Davis, Vanessa Svihla, Madalyn Wilson-Fetrow
scdavis@unm.edu, vsvihla@unm.edu, mefetrow144@unm.edu
University of New Mexico

Abstract: Research on change efforts in higher education highlights the importance of change teams having sufficient authority to bring about the change they envision. This paper employs an activity-theoretical framework for organizational change known as expansive learning, along with theory on agency and intersectional power, to examine how faculty exhibited change agency in dialogue in observational data from an engineering department undergoing a major reform project. We analyzed discourse from audio-recorded faculty meetings and workshops within this six-year change project to characterize change agency in talk. Findings highlight the importance of meeting stakeholders where they are, acknowledging and legitimizing their concerns, sharing agency with them, articulating potential control, and inviting them into the effort in ways that suggest ownership. This study extends previous work on expansive learning by illuminating discursive practices that can further joint object-oriented activity in ways that foster stakeholder agency.

Background and purpose

Institutions of higher education face a variety of pressures for change, ranging from external accountability to increasing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Over the past decade, much attention has focused on organizational change efforts in higher education, including those funded by the NSF Revolutionizing Engineering Departments (RED) program. Related research highlights the importance of change teams having sufficient authority to bring about the change they envision (Doten-Snitker et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2020), as well as the capacity to recognize and contend with ways that structural and normative power relations are reproduced (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Kellam et al., 2021).

We drew from a conception of organizational learning based in activity theory known as expansive learning (Engeström, 1987; Engeström et al., 2007; Engeström & Sannino, 2010) to examine how faculty involved in one RED project situated in a large, public, Hispanic-Serving Institution expressed agency in discourse during the change process, and how their expressions of agency were shaped by structural, cultural, normative, and interpersonal power relations. Findings highlight the importance of meeting faculty where they are and collaboratively moving the work forward by explicitly placing agency with stakeholders in the change process.

Theoretical framework

To explore faculty agency during organizational change, we bring together theory on framing agency, intersectional power, and expansive learning. An intersectional approach to understanding power relations suggests that power is distributed across structures, cultures, disciplinary norms, and interpersonal factors (Collins & Bilge, 2020). We intersect this complex, dynamic conception of power with theory about agency, including material agency. While classical conceptions of agency highlight dialectic tensions between human agency and structures that constrain such agency (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992), more recent theory highlights the situated nature of agency, in which some decisions are consequential (Svihla et al., 2021). Rather than humans and structures in opposition, this conception of agency highlights how agency is distributed and negotiated across humans, structures, and materials (Eglash et al., 2020).

To consider how agency and power relate to organizational learning processes, we draw from expansive learning, based in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT; Engeström, 1987, 2001; Engeström et al., 2007). Expansive learning is an iterative, evolving process of development in which interdependent elements of an activity system (e.g., rules, tools, community, division of labor) are re-mediated through collective activity in order to better serve the *object*, or collective motive, of activity (Engeström, 1987). CHAT highlights the role of historically-laden tensions within and between components of the activity system, known as contradictions, in driving change and learning (Engeström, 2001). These contradictions manifest through disturbances, conflicts, or double binds in the activity system (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Development and learning occur as individuals and groups attempt to resolve contradictions through the development of new tools, practices, or social relations aimed at better aiding an evolving object. These developments and new practices lead to changes or expansions of the object through *expansive learning*.

In this paper, we attend to faculty's *change agency*, or agency aimed at shifting structures, norms, and practices towards the object of expansive learning. Boreham and Morgan (2004) identified dialogue, carried out within relational practices, as the fundamental process of expansive learning. We consider how faculty's change agency was exhibited in dialogue in observational data from an engineering department undergoing a major reform project, guided by the following research question: How do faculty exhibit change agency in dialogue during expansive learning processes?

Methods

The study takes place within the context of a RED project situated in an engineering department at a large, public, Hispanic-Serving Institution. Both authors were members of the change team, though neither are engineers. To examine faculty change agency, we selected data from a large corpus of qualitative data collected over six years, including more than 80 hours of transcribed audio recordings of interviews and faculty meetings and workshops, involving 20 faculty. We selected data with attention to contentiousness and disagreement, as contentiousness and disagreement seem to be markers of power differentials as experienced by the participants. We focused primarily on interactional data (e.g., faculty meetings and workshops) in order to characterize change agency in dialogue.

We analyzed transcribed data using the framing agency coding toolkit (Svihla et al., 2021), a discourse analytic approach adapted from past studies of how agency shows up in talk (Kanopasky & Sheridan, 2016). This approach focuses on how forms of speech, especially the subject and verb, express or mitigate agency. First person subjects show higher agency than third person. Verbs may suggest no, potential, or full control. As a sociocultural approach (Gee, 2014), we considered what and whom individuals expressed agency over or assigned agency to as they attempted to further particular organizational changes.

Results and discussion

To explore change agency within dialogue, we analyzed interactional data from transcribed faculty meetings and retreats to highlight what change agency might look like as it plays out. The vignette highlighted in Figure 1, which takes place during a faculty meeting near the beginning of the RED team's change effort, involves members of a change team who, at that point, did not share a common understanding of the object of expansive learning, including the change strategies they would employ to reach that object. Lin (names are pseudonyms), in the role of engineering education researcher, had developed the project's core curricular approach with Arun, the department leader. The change team planned to thread design challenges through core engineering courses, with teams of faculty, students, the engineering education researcher, and other partners collaborating across power differentials and employing an asset-based orientation to develop the design challenges. At this point in the project, while Arun was occupied during design challenge planning processes, Park stepped up to support the effort by meeting with students on the design challenge planning team.

In this vignette, Park raised concerns about the students' capacity to contribute to the development of the design challenge, taking a deficit-oriented approach to the students' contributions despite change goals emphasizing an asset orientation. In voicing this concern, Park displayed a lack of control ("what needs to be emphasized"), offloading agency onto the course content in ways that reinforced cultural norms about the role of students. Rather than forcefully countering Park, Lin and Arun met Park's concern with verbs showing potential control (e.g., might, going to, could). Lin, who held some power as an expert on learning, which was mitigated by their status as a non-tenured woman who was not an engineer, worked to recast the role of the student to align it with the planned change strategy. Next, Arun articulated what he thought was an assumption about the roles of students that Park held, which Park confirmed. This apparent openness seems counter to models of change that emphasize the importance of forming shared vision (Kotter, 1995). Arun made a discursive move to express sharing Park's concern (using "we,"), though Park's concern was counter to the specific strategy of engaging students for their perspectives and interests. Arun then took collective responsibility for the issues Park brought up ("We may not have been... successful in finding the right students in year one."), explicitly assigning Park agency in addressing this issue ("Well, you're going to develop the next one.").

Rather than directly confronting Park's concern as "wrong" or against the goals of the change project, Arun used his power as department leader to employ Park's concern in the service of moving the collective work forward. Arun employed a form of change agency by meeting Park where he was at that moment and encouraging development from that current place. By feigning shared ownership of Park's concern, Arun acknowledged the realness of the concern, then suggested that both the faculty collectively and Park specifically could address this challenge moving forward. By working with Park in a way that recognized Park's motives and aligning his responses with those of others involved in expansive learning processes, Arun demonstrated relational agency (Edwards, 2010). Arun capitalized on his power as department leader to discursively legitimize Park's concern, then worked to create an organizational narrative (Davis, 2022; Edwards, 2010) that attempted to move Park and

other faculty in the room to expand the object of activity collaboratively by making specific suggestions of what “could” happen to address this concern moving forward (e.g., “This problem can be revisited with far more complexity in [junior classes] or later”. Arun placed agency and autonomy with faculty in this process (“... We could build up or dispense with it and move on to something else. That’s really up to each class.”). Finally, Arun invited other faculty to engage in the joint work of expansive learning (“Now we really throw it open to everybody to say, how can your research be integrated into undergraduate education?”).

Figure 1

A vignette from early in a change project. In the transcription, we used dashes to indicate pauses, all caps to indicate emphasis in the audio file, [...] when part of the transcript was removed for clarity, brackets to help clarify statements, and // to indicate overlapping talk.

High agency marker. First person singular subject
Shared agency marker. First person plural subject
Framing agency marker. Verbs show potential control
Low agency marker. External person/object subject
Low agency marker. Verb indicates lack of control

Park: So, I express a couple of concerns about, so number one is the students that we are hiring to accomplish to develop these challenges. I-I-I-a particular student came into my office, [and] it seems he’s essentially parroting what I told him to when it comes to the phase change and what needs to be emphasized, simply experiments that I suggested. And he had absolutely NO idea how to solve transient heat transport problems. um so not that we were expecting that from 101 students, uh, the student had no idea what their key problems were and if the students were actually helping them design, um, rather reducing the complexity of that problem to match the understanding of sophomores and freshman year students, I think there is, there’s a lapse there s- I want to express that concern um.

Lin: I will say that the student point of view is also very important, having the students on the team, because they’re able to tell us what kinds of things they know, what kinds of things were hard for them in the classes they’ve taken very much like the peer learning facilitators. They’re also going to tell us if something seems interesting to them, it’s the kind of thing that’s come up in classes. What other classes they might’ve taken that this would have been beneficial for. Um, and so that point of view, that expertise they bring was actually a really //.

Arun: // I think what Park’s concern is, I know what you’re expecting is that the students who helped design this challenge should have a high level of understanding of the subject so that they know it fully. And then they’ll simplify it down to//

Park: // Distill it

Arun: to freshmen level Right.

Park: yes

Arun: That’s what we’d like to see now we may not have been done have been successful in finding the right students in year 1. Well, you’re going to develop the next one. This is a good point.

Park: ALSO And then the second point that I was going to make is this will be much more appropriate for [a junior course] then perhaps even 101.

Arun: Yeah. So we’re going to scratch the surface. [...] This problem can be revisited with far more complexity in [junior courses] or later. So the idea is this is not the end of this challenge. This challenge could become far more sophisticated and we could build up or dispense with it and move on to something else. That’s really up to each class. [...] Now we really throw it open to everybody to say, how can your research be integrated into undergraduate education?

Significance and implications

Arun’s response to Park’s concern is characteristic of change agency. This single vignette of a contentious moment early in the project is not sufficient, on its own, to encapsulate how faculty exhibit change agency in expansive learning in what has become a very successful change effort. However, we argue that it does highlight key elements of change agency: as meeting others where they are, sharing agency with them (“we”), using potential control verbs (can, could, might, etc.), acknowledging and legitimizing their concerns, and inviting them into the effort in ways that suggest ownership.

In processes of expansive learning, contradictions unsettle existing practices and potentially motivate and guide re-mediation of the activity system in ways that further collective learning and development. However, contradictions do not necessarily lead to expansive learning; expansive learning cycles may be broken or abandoned (Engeström et al., 2007). Engeström and colleagues (2007) found that there were times when efforts to “bridge” the discontinuities leading to “breaks” in a cycle of expansive learning were successful in continuing organizational development towards an expanding object, while at other times these attempts were not successful. In these cases, expansive learning processes were abandoned and an alternative object was embraced. Research

on organizational change from an activity theory perspective often ignores or underspecifies the important role and contribution of individual learning, identity, agency, and motivation (Billett, 2006; Edwards, 2010; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). This study expands on the important but undertheorized role of individuals and relational practices within processes of expansive learning (Boreham & Morgan, 2004; Engeström et al., 2007). In our data selection, we looked for contentious moments that illuminated contradictions between existing aspects of the activity system and the object of the change project. In this vignette, we saw such a contentious moment and the ways in which change team leaders addressed a concern counter to the goals of the project. Their discursive moves, which both legitimized the faculty member's concern and fostered stakeholder agency and ownership in moving the change project forward, offer a new glimpse into relational practices that help bridge discontinuities in expansive learning (Davis, 2022).

We recognize these discursive markers as potentially necessary but not sufficient ingredients for fostering agency within expansive learning. However, this analysis highlights possibility for both research and practice in attending closely to dialogue, the fundamental process of expansive learning (Boreham & Morgan, 2004), in considering faculty's change agency.

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