ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Reframing the migrant academic journey through Activity Theory: A reflective autoethnography

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Comprising a significant portion of the Australian population (35.5% according to (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), migrants often navigate complex socio-professional landscapes. This autoethnographic reflection explores the transformative journey of an educator who migrated from India two decades ago as a skilled professional. Utilising Activity Theory (AT) as a conceptual framework, this paper delineates the major milestones, challenges, and instrumental mediations that have shaped the author's trajectory in the Australian higher education sector. By foregrounding the interplay of personal agency, systemic structures, and cultural dynamics, this account provides concrete examples of how initial hurdles were leveraged as catalysts for growth and the development of a nuanced professional identity. The paper draws upon retrospective journal entries and contemporary reflections to illuminate the multifaceted nature of migration beyond purely economic considerations, culminating in insights pertinent to future migrant educators and a connection to emerging research on systemic biases.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Reflective practice, Third Space professionals, Activity Theory

Introduction

The decision to migrate is rarely a unidimensional act, often encompassing a complex interplay of personal aspirations and perceived opportunities. My own migration to Australia in 2004, following a visit in 1999 to study distance education practices in a geographically expansive nation, was driven by a desire for professional growth and a proactive pursuit of new horizons. While initially framed by a pragmatic outlook, the ensuing years unveiled a challenging yet profoundly transformative journey within the Australian academic landscape. This paper adopts an autoethnographic approach (Poulos, 2012, 2017, 2021), a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to use personal experience to describe and interpret cultural phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). This methodology is particularly suited to the conference theme, "Future-Focused: Educating in an Era of Continuous Change," and its sub-theme, "Your Journey," which values challenges, setbacks, and reflections as integral to learning and growth. My narrative is framed through the lens of Activity Theory (AT), a socio-cultural framework that posits human activity as purposeful, mediated, and constantly evolving within a specific context (Engeström, 1987; Leont'ev, 1978). By applying AT, I aim to systematically identify the personal, social, cultural, and systemic elements that have shaped my professional identity and trajectory as an academic in a new country.

Activity Theory as a Conceptual Framework

Activity theory-Historical development

Activity theory originated in Soviet psychology in the 1920s and 1930s. Its foundational roots are deeply embedded in cultural-historical psychology, particularly through the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), who is often considered the "grandfather" of activity theory. His work, particularly on mediated action (the idea that human activity is mediated by tools and signs) and the social nature of learning and development, laid the theoretical groundwork(Vygotsky, 1978). Alexei Leontiev (1903-1979), a student and collaborator of Vygotsky, further developed and systematised activity theory into a more coherent framework (Leont'ev, 1978). He expanded on the idea of "activity" as the primary unit of analysis, distinguishing between activities, actions, and operations, and emphasising the object-oriented nature of human activity.

Engeström's work (1987) came significantly *after* the foundational works of Vygotsky and Leontiev. He took the basic principles and developed the widely recognised activity system model making the theory more robust for analysing complex, collective, and organisational activities, especially in fields like education, organisational learning, and research.

Bonnie A. Nardi's (1996) edited volume, *Context and Consciousness: Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction*, played a crucial role in introducing and popularising activity theory within Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) in the Western world. Nardi's work in 1996 came *after* Engeström's significant contributions to the modern form of activity theory. Her book served as an accessible entry point for researchers in HCI and related fields, demonstrating how activity theory could be a powerful lens for understanding human interaction with technology in real-world contexts. She applied the more developed, Engeström-influenced version of activity theory to practical problems in technology design and use.

Activity Theory

Activity Theory provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the complex interplay between individuals, their actions, and the socio-cultural systems in which they operate. As Nardi (1996) states:

"Activity theory … is concerned with understanding the relationship between consciousness and activity and has laboured to provide a framework in which a meaningful unity between the two can be conceived".

Central to AT is the concept of an "activity system," which comprises a subject (the individual or group, in this context, it's me), an object (the purpose or goal of the activity, my settlement in a new country), and mediating artefacts (tools, language, symbols, knowledge). This system (as shown in the fig.1 below) is embedded within a community, governed by rules, and characterised by a division of labour (Engeström, 1987). Challenges and contradictions within an activity system are viewed not as mere obstacles but as drivers of change and development (story of my development), prompting subjects to adapt their actions or transform the system itself (making a difference in the community).

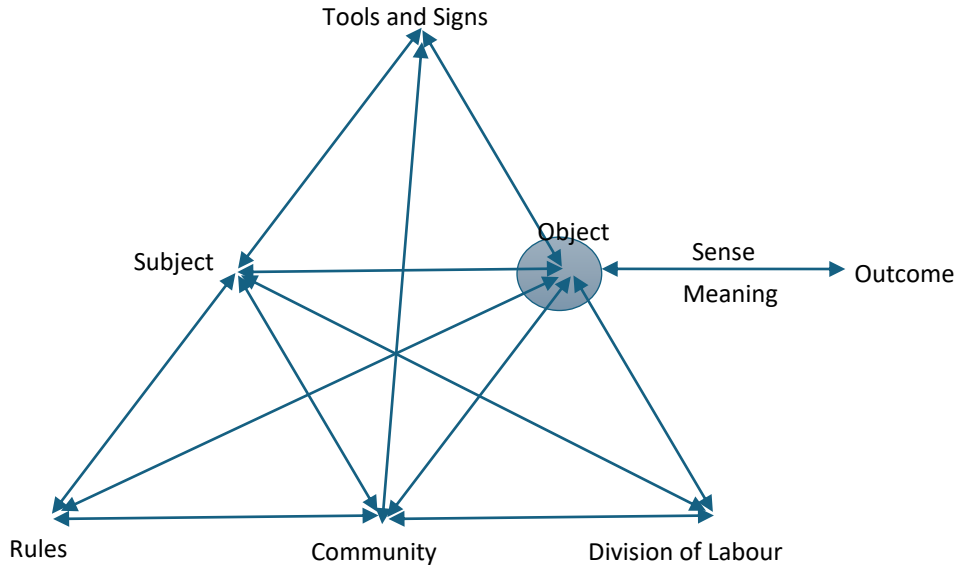

Fig.1: The structure of a human activity system recreated from Engeström, 1987, p. 78

My journey, therefore, can be understood as a series of evolving activity systems, each characterised by distinct objects, mediations, and community dynamics. The "social matrix" (Nardi, 1996), encompassing the broader societal and institutional contexts, continuously influenced and reshaped these activities. This framework allows for a backward-looking analysis that yields forward-thinking insights, consistent with the conference's thematic focus on adaptability and continuous change in education.

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Navigating the Initial Activity System: Settling and Seeking Employment

Upon arrival in Australia, my initial activity system was primarily oriented towards the object of securing professional employment within higher education. Despite holding multiple master's and bachelor's degrees in physics and education, coupled with eight years of experience leading technology and distance education projects in India, I encountered significant disjuncture between my previous professional context and the new Australian landscape.

Personal Mediations and Contradictions

The immediate post-migration period was marked by an unforeseen struggle to secure initial employment. My prior confidence as a successful academic was challenged by a series of rejections. This contradiction between my perceived capabilities and the employer's response initiated a significant period of learning and adaptation. A pivotal internal rule emerged: "*No matter what, I will not be doing a job that does not enhance my CV further*." This determination mediated my subsequent job-seeking efforts, transforming passive applications into a more assertive engagement with the recruitment process. For instance, my proactive approach of visiting the prospective workplace and engaging directly with the contact person to understand the nuances of the position proved instrumental in securing my first academic appointment. This act represented a significant shift in my 'tool-use' within the job application activity system, moving beyond conventional written applications to direct interpersonal mediation.

Institutional Rules and Systemic Biases

My entry into a metropolitan university as a Level A academic (0.5 FTE) introduced new institutional rules. A primary condition of employment was the completion of a PhD along with a job. While initially perceived as an opportunity to "*kill two birds with one stone*", this seemingly straightforward objective soon revealed systemic contradictions. The requirement for English proficiency (IELTS academic with a minimum 7 band), despite my employment and existing qualifications, followed by repeated administrative shifts between PhD and master's by research enrolments due to the (non)recognition of Indian qualifications, highlighted underlying systemic biases. My decision to pragmatically continue with the Master by Research, despite being offered re-enrolment into a PhD, was a strategic response to these uncertainties, indicative of a migrant's adaptive approach to navigating a new system. This experience underscored the 'rules' within the institutional activity system that subtly, or overtly, discriminated against international qualifications and non-native English speakers. This came across in direct and indirect actions from the people in my surroundings and administration who automatically believed in my inefficiency because of my country of origin.

Mediating Tools and Their Impact

The transition also necessitated an adaptation to unfamiliar technological tools, specifically Apple computers, which I had never used previously. The absence of readily accessible informal support structures, characteristic of a new professional environment, transformed basic technological tasks into significant learning challenges. This technological barrier, coupled with a perceived marginalisation in the division of labour (being assigned photocopying duties instead of teaching, unlike my other counterparts), created significant tension within my initial academic role. This situation points to a contradiction between the expected 'object' of an academic role (teaching, research) and the 'division of labour' I experienced, mediated by systemic (and perhaps unconscious) biases. My inability to effectively communicate this dissatisfaction to my supervisor was, in hindsight, deeply rooted in cultural norms of respect, which was a significant 'rule' within my personal activity system that clashed with the organisational culture.

The Evolving Activity System: Beyond PhD and Towards Establishment

The completion of my master's and subsequent PhD, albeit over an extended timeframe, marked a crucial shift in my professional activity system. By this time, over 10years in Australia, I juggled additional sessional teaching (0.5 Level A income was not enough), study and family with two small children. These overlapping activity systems (of work, study, family and emotions) and the differing rules and divisions of labour of each of them caused a lot of tensions and disruptions at all fronts. This family, work and study resulted into delay in my PhD and having my children in childcare for 10hours a day. This also created a deep sense of guilt towards my children, whom I was not able to give time. As there were very limited choices that I had (extra work,

family and home and study, I felt like, rather than me being the subject, I was the object of those competing activity systems.
I, however, developed a deeper understanding of cultural nuances and institutional dynamics considerably in this period. Professionally, this period was characterised by a diverse portfolio of casual, sessional, and full-time roles across nine different Australian universities, encompassing both academic and professional capacities, and spanning on-campus, hybrid, and distance modalities. This diverse experience enriched my 'toolkit' and broadened my 'community' of practice.

Refining the Object: Career Trajectory and Persistent Challenges

A critical decision emerged regarding my career objective: whether to pursue an academic or professional path. Recognising that my academic credentials were often overshadowed by my professional staff title in previous roles, I made a conscious decision to "only work as an academic." This focused object initially streamlined my job search; however, it was followed by a period of repeated rejections despite securing numerous interviews. This persistent contradiction between my qualifications/experience and lack of tenure underscored deeply entrenched systemic issues within the academic job market, revealing implicit rules that were not readily discernible through formal feedback. This frustration led me to a re-evaluation of the strategies, securing two mentors from the community of practice as a sounding board. The strategy around selecting the mentors was based on my prior experience of biases that I faced, which resulted in the selection of two mid-career, midcareer-coloured women academics who reinforced the required confidence in me to present myself differently in the interviews.

Developing New Mediating Tools for Career Progression

The journey towards established academic status necessitated the acquisition and mastery of new mediating tools, extending beyond traditional academic skills.

Social Media as a Cultural Artefact

Social media emerged as a critical mediating artefact for professional visibility. Culturally, the act of self-promotion and being "loud about my achievement" was antithetical to my ingrained modest cultural norms. This presented a significant contradiction between my cultural 'rules' and the professional 'rules' of academic career progression in Australia. Despite adapting my communication style, crafting a simple LinkedIn post highlighting research or achievements remained a formidable challenge. The encouragement from my mentors, who were also migrants and women and coloured, like me, played a major role in convincing me to use social media. My decision to strategically adopt LinkedIn as my sole professional social media presence (an ‘unwritten rule’ for academics’ career progression and establishing credibility) was a conscious effort to balance cultural comfort with professional necessity, transforming this challenging 'tool' into a manageable one within my activity system.

Professional Bodies as Community Nodes

An uncalculated but highly beneficial strategy involved affiliating with professional bodies outside the university. My proactive engagement as a co-leader of the Learning Design Special Interest Group (SIG) within ASCILITE (Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education) initially stemmed from a desire for knowledge and networking. This participation, however, transformed into a powerful mediating tool, expanding my professional community and facilitating engagement in broader initiatives. These external communities provided new 'rules' and 'division of labour' for professional development that transcended my immediate institutional context. The community also opened unexpected new challenges (responsibility) for community members with similar backgrounds or challenges, seeing me as a leader in this space. This new responsibility posed an ethical challenge within my sphere of community, which was restricted to creating a social presence and networking in the first place.

Peripheral Skills and Adaptive Capacity

My willingness to acquire "peripheral skills" – formal qualifications in areas such as web design, project management, professional video production, and photography – reflects a profound adaptive capacity. These skills, seemingly unrelated to my core qualifications in Physics and Education, became invaluable mediating tools, broadening my expertise and increasing my versatility within the dynamic higher education landscape. Initially, I considered achieving these skills just to be ‘good at what I do’. However, in hindsight, these mediating tools enabled me to be more ‘employable’ by the employers. I also see my striving for new skills as

'academic resilience' and 'overcompensating' for other people's perception of who I am (a migrant, coloured, short woman who speaks English differently to native speakers). This also relates to the responsibility towards similar community members and led me to mentor many of them for their career progression.

While the process of acquiring these skills alongside full-time work and family responsibilities was challenging, it underscored a personal rule: curiosity and a proactive approach to learning as essential for navigating continuous change.

Collaboration as a Collective Tool

A significant shift occurred in my understanding and utilisation of collaboration. Initially, research and publication were often solitary endeavours. However, recognising the daunting nature of individual scholarly output, particularly as a 'third space professional' navigating teaching and professional development roles, I began to actively engage in collaborative research and writing. Collaboration became a powerful collective mediating tool, offering "division of labour, variety of perspective on the issue that is being investigated, and collective knowledge." This transition significantly increased my research outputs, highlighting the transformative power of shifting from an individual to a collective 'subject' in the research activity system.

Evidencing Work: A Critical Rule

The importance of "evidencing your work" for career progression was a hard-learned rule for me. This involved systematically collecting and presenting achievements, ranging from positive email feedback and screenshots to evaluation forms from workshops and webinars. The emergence of social media further diversified the forms of evidence, including images and peer comments. This practice transformed the 'object' of professional development from mere accomplishment to demonstrable impact, crucial for navigating promotion processes within higher education.

Reflecting on the Journey: Outcomes and Future-Focused Implications

My journey, viewed through the lens of Activity Theory, reveals a continuous process of adaptation, negotiation, and transformation within evolving activity systems. The "activities" I undertook were often direct consequences of the social, cultural, and systemic contradictions encountered. The initial experiences of perceived discrimination, particularly during job searches both early in my migration and even after acquiring local qualifications, were emotionally challenging. However, these contradictions served as powerful drivers, prompting a deeper engagement with and ultimately research into systemic biases. This transformation of a negative experience into a positive research trajectory exemplifies the developmental potential within Activity Theory's framework.

My struggle to establish myself within academia and as a 'third space professional' has cultivated a heightened sense of consciousness and compassion. This is reflected in my interactions with others: "*I noticed that when I talk to people individually or part of a group, they feel that I care*." This personal transformation has directly influenced my commitment to mentorship, a role I now actively embrace: "*I often think that 'I wish someone had told me this before*'." The impact of this mentorship is evident in the feedback I received after one of my panel presentations: "*I almost cried. I felt like I had a voice*" and from a Mantee "*Even during peak periods, you consistently made time for our mentoring sessions, demonstrating your genuine care and investment in my success. Your guidance and advice were instrumental in helping me write my first concise paper*." These anecdotal accounts underscore the profound human impact of navigating and overcoming systemic challenges, leading to a desire to empower others on similar journeys.

Conclusion

This autoethnographic account illustrates that the migrant academic journey in an era of continuous change is not a linear progression but a dynamic interplay of personal agency, systemic structures, and socio-cultural mediation. By valuing challenges and setbacks as essential components of the path, and by continually adapting and acquiring new mediating tools, individuals can transform their experiences into profound learning and growth, ultimately contributing to a more adaptable, innovative, and sustainable future for education. This backward-looking reflection offers forward-thinking insights, emphasising the critical role of self-awareness, strategic adaptation, and empathetic engagement in preparing both learners and educators for an ever-evolving world.

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