Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) provides a framework to analyze complex systems both in research and in curriculum design and evaluation. By using CHAT, scholars and leaders can study new educational innovations or existing processes to discover the facilitators of and barriers to change. \(^1\) CHAT emerges from Vygotsky’s concept of object-oriented action (an activity) mediated by tools (both symbolic [e.g., competencies] and physical [e.g., a patient’s chart]). \(^2\) Engeström, a prominent CHAT theorist, uses the activity system as the unit of analysis to explore the myriad relationships that are part of a complex setting. \(^3\) CHAT can be used to understand systems of different scales—from daily interpersonal interactions to large institutional initiatives.

Multiple activity systems may interact. Contradictions and tensions may become apparent within and between activity systems. CHAT can provide guidance for analyzing how power and agency are used to resolve those contradictions (or not). The work of resolving tensions can lead to new ways of acting (i.e., expansive learning).\(^1,3\) Consider the situation of a clerkship student (illustrated below). In each activity system, the student (i.e., subject) uses different tools to achieve different objects (i.e., contribute to patient care and master basic facts). Problematically, the activity systems have competing outcomes. By recognizing the contradictions (illustrated below), in each activity system, the student (i.e., subject) uses different tools to achieve different objects (i.e., contribute to patient care and master basic facts). Problematically, the activity systems have competing outcomes. By recognizing the contradictions between systems, medical educators can identify potential resolutions. For example, an educator may choose an assessment tool, such as the entrustable professional activities framework, that better aligns with the object of a student contributing to patient care.

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**The Activity System**

- **Tools**
  - The symbolic and physical objects that mediate the activity and facilitate the accomplishment of the object

- **Subject**
  - The person engaged in the activity

- **Object**
  - The purpose of the activity

- **Outcomes**
  - The overarching end products of the activity

- **Rules**
  - The norms, expectations, and power relations that guide the activity

- **Community**
  - The groups to which the subject belongs and/or which are affected by the activity

- **Division of Labor**
  - The ways the activity is divided among members of the community

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**Learner-as-Provider Activity System**

- **Subject**
  - Student

- **Tools**
  - Patient-specific readings

- **Object**
  - Contribution to patient care

- **Rules**
  - Students are expected to research their patients’ problems

- **Community**
  - Health care providers

- **Division of Labor**
  - Students have more time than other team members to analyze readings

**Competing Outcomes**

- **Patient well-being**

- **Grades**

- **Professional development**

**Learner-as-Student Activity System**

- **Subject**
  - Student

- **Tools**
  - End-of-clerkship subject exams

- **Object**
  - Mastery of basic facts

- **Rules**
  - Exams are the standard measure of facts

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**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of Defense.

**References:**

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