



**Book Review**

**Studies in expansive learning:  
Learning what is not yet there**

Yrjö Engeström

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288 pages

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The book's author, Professor Yrjö Engeström, is the Director of the Centre for Research on Activity, Development and Learning (CRADLE) at the University of Helsinki. He is widely known for the development of what is known as third generation Cultural Historic Activity Theory (CHAT) and the Theory of Expansive Learning. According to Google Scholar, his seminal book which explains the theories, *Learning by Expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research* (Engeström 1987, reprint 2015) has been cited in 13976 pieces of scholarly writing.

This book under review, *Studies in Expansive Learning: Learning What Is Not Yet There*, consists of ten journal articles either authored or co-authored by Engeström. It is a very useful companion to *Learning*

by *Expanding* as it adds knowledge of Expansive Learning in action through practical examples of empirical research designed to initiate transformation in organisations. Engeström writes:

*A complex theory is made alive by its empirical applications and further conceptual and methodological developments. This book presents a representative set of such work which I have conducted together with my colleagues and students. It might be read and used as a companion volume and substantive extension to the new edition of Learning by Expanding (2016:vii).*

I was drawn to CHAT and Expansive Learning as a theoretical lens for my PhD thesis *Innovative Applied Learning for School Completion: An Activity Theory Perspective* (Hawken 2019) by my supervisor at Deakin University, Professor Damian Blake. The theories provided a structure for me to analyse the learning action in my research into an alternative, sports-based education provider for senior high school students. I was able to analyse the development of the learning model and its reception by education bureaucrats through the eyes of the school founders, management and teachers, and the program's hands-on applied learning through the eyes of the students, parents and other stakeholders. I was fortunate in 2013 to attend a summer school at CRADLE in Helsinki for a three-week workshop with Professor Engeström and other notable CRADLE scholars, some of whom are co-authors of the papers in this book. The experience has had a lasting effect on me. I was also fortunate to meet him and hear him speak at two later conferences, as well as read most of his research writing. He has certainly been an inspiration to my thinking about learning, not just classroom learning but learning in the wider world of community and social organisations and business.

CHAT and Expansive Learning Theory are built on early twentieth century research into learning in the Soviet Union by Lev Vygotsky and colleagues but did not reach the West until the late 1960s. Engeström reconceptualised the findings of that early research to develop his theories as a practical way to instigate social and workplace change. In the 2015 edition of *Learning by Expanding* he cited his motivations for developing CHAT and Expansive Learning Theory. He wanted to find a new way to understand cognition and learning that was not isolated from the cultural context. To do this, he set out to develop a research methodology based on practical, empirical studies rather than those based on the traditional

means of observation and analysis. Lastly, he believed that ‘research needs to be actively involved in making the world better’ (p xiii) and wanted to develop a practical framework to achieve that goal.

With colleagues at the University of Helsinki, he developed a methodology initially named Developmental Work Research (DWR) ‘for applying activity theory and the theory of expansive learning in the world of work, technology, and organisations’ (Engeström, 2015: xiii). DWR became commonly known as the Change Laboratory (CL) in the mid-1990s.

At the 2013 Helsinki Summer School, I was introduced to the CL methodology of ‘formative interventions’ and observed the process in action in a range of organisations. I saw first-hand some of the research written in this book and met some of the co-authors and researchers. I was also introduced to some of the papers that are included in the book and which subsequently I cited quite extensively in my thesis. The book comprises three sections: Part One – Setting the Stage; Part Two – Elaborations and Applications; and Part Three – Future Perspectives.

Part One provides information that places Expansive Learning in the learning sciences and goes some way to explaining Activity Theory and Expansive learning. The first chapter explains Activity Theory and its conceptualisation as a triangle graphic that provides a guide to examine the ebbs and flows in any form of human activity, and between different activities. It then explains the role of challenges or problems (contradictions) to inspire new learning or new ways of doing things. The second paper introduces and discusses some other theories of learning, then introduces the expansive learning cycle and the structure and process of Change Laboratory interventions. I found the third paper particularly helpful in my understanding of formative interventions and expansive learning. It provides an extensive explanation of how expansive learning is manifested and depicts examples of different Change Laboratory interventions.

Part Two includes chapters four to eight and contains in-depth empirical studies of the Change Laboratory in action in organisational settings including a bank, a school, a medical centre, a hospital, a hi-tech manufacturing company, and a library. Each of these brings groups of stakeholders together in a workshop scenario where a series of discussions are promoted and recorded by CRADLE researchers to collectively create a new and better way of working or operating.

I was able to meet the researchers who were involved in the library project. It was an attempt to improve the University of Helsinki's library services for twenty-first century students. The three existing libraries were grouped into one, with the construction of a new modern building. Emphasis was given to the inclusion of digital technologies and facilitating research groups in library services. The new library is magnificent. I had the opportunity to speak to the researchers and library stakeholders to learn how they went through the change process to determine a new set of goals and procedures. There were many hurdles along the way, which is the same for most change labs. It was interesting to read each of the contexts and their findings. These almost provide a how-to guide to conducting a Change Laboratory intervention.

In Chapters Nine and Ten (Part Three) the author looks to the future. How interventions can be employed in major new challenges and possibilities arising from rapidly spreading 'wildfire' activities such as global warming or disaster relief. He looks at how the methodology of formative interventions aimed at triggering and supporting expansive learning can be employed and improved to create positive change in society. The ongoing expansion in CHAT research and thinking is clearly within the spirit of 'creating something new together' or 'learning what is not yet there'.

The appeal for me is that while I found a theoretical framework on which to base my research analysis, it is not 'set in concrete'. There is flexibility in CHAT and Expansive Learning applications according to context. There is always the possibility of adding something new. This book attests to that and opens a world of possibilities for future learning in organisations and workplaces. This book is an excellent resource for researchers and practitioners in education and community settings. It offers a toolkit to help with interventions in workplaces, schools, and communities.

## References

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