

## **Learning as Boundary-Crossing in a University Department as Teachers' Workplace**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at teachers' informal learning in a university department in China. The research is situated against the backdrop of globalization at the time when the Chinese Ministry of Education advocated a liberal way of teaching English to college students so as to meet the social demands of a global English culture. To change the traditional curriculum, the Department of English Language Education (DELE) at the South University (pseudonym) developed an experimental course called 'critical thinking and creative learning' (CTCL) that reflects the liberal ideology in education. When the East meets the West, the prevailing issue in cross-cultural communication arises – shall we go global or local? In this paper, based on a small set of data of informal discussion among three Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in the department, the author draws on the third generation of activity theory and looks at how the problems in the CTCL course are negotiated with micro-analysis. It is argued that the university department as teachers' workplace for learning constitutes the boundary zone of the global and the local activity systems, and the process of boundary-crossing is mediated by the social practices as boundary objects.

**Key words:** Boundary-crossing, boundary zone, boundary object, teachers' workplace.

**I. Introduction**

This paper looks at teachers’ informal learning in a university department in China. The research is situated against the backdrop of globalization at the time when the Chinese Ministry of Education advocated a liberal way of teaching English to college students so as to meet the social demands of a global English culture. To change the traditional curriculum, the Department of English Language Education (DELE) at the South University (pseudonym) developed an experimental course called ‘critical thinking and creative learning’ (CTCL) that reflects the liberal ideology in education. When the East meets the West, the prevailing issue in cross-cultural communication arises – shall we go global or local? In this paper, based on a small set of data of informal discussion among three Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in the department, the author draws on the third generation of activity theory (Engeström, 2001, 2007) and looks at how the problems in the CTCL course are negotiated with micro-analysis (Little, 2002, 2003, Grossman et al., 2001). It is argued that the university department as teachers’ workplace for learning constitutes the boundary zone of the global and the local activity systems, and the process of boundary-crossing is mediated by the social practices as boundary objects .

**II. Theoretical framework**

Teachers’ learning in the present study is situated in a reform-oriented workplace which features the co-existence of two models of teaching. The model

which features collaboration, autonomous learning and formative assessment, reflects a trend towards global hegemony of liberal schooling, while the model which embraces grammar-focus, textbook-governedness, and teacher-centeredness is a legacy of Confucian tradition. Drawing on the third generation of activity theory (Engeström, 2001), we could conceptualize the liberal model of teaching as a global activity system and the traditional model as a local activity system (see Figure 1).

As Wenger (1998) noted, when two systems interact with each other, problems and difficulties will arise. The different voices in the reform could be seen as the reification of the contradictions between the global and the local activity systems. The department as teachers’ workplace thus could be seen as the boundary zone of the two activity systems, while the social practice, i.e. the informal discussion among teachers could be viewed as the boundary object that mediates the boundary-crossing process. By answering the question of how teachers position in the negotiation during the informal discussion, this paper looks at the process of boundary-crossing from the discourse perspective. A point worth noting here is that the outcome of negotiation is not necessarily agreement and consensus. More often than not, the problems remain unsolved with disagreement and difference. In whichever case, the people involved in negotiation need to think and reflect. In this sense, negotiation creates a potential space for learning. It is also the purpose of this paper to address the complexity and polycontextuality of the boundary zone for teacher learning (Tsui & Law, 2007).

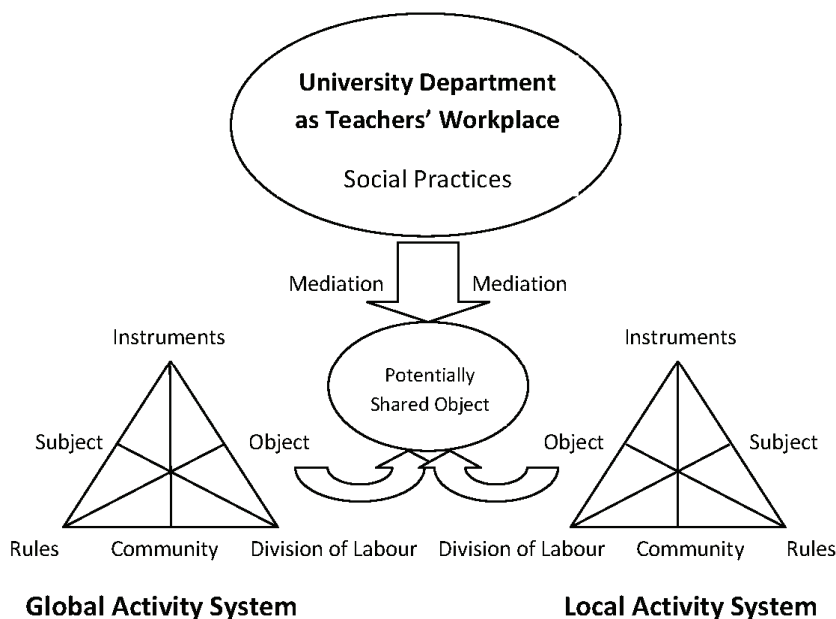


Figure 1 An activity theory perspective on the mediation of social practices on boundary-crossing in teachers’ workplace (based on Engeström, 2001)

### III. Critical thinking and creative learning

In aligning with the English language teaching reform in higher education and the mission statement of the department, ‘a haven of innovation and change’, an experimental course called ‘critical thinking and creative learning’ was set up for the students in DELE. As the name indicates, this course is intended to help the students think critically and learn creatively, both of which are considered to be the essence of Western education and reflect a global trend of schooling. On the one hand, students are required to think independently and make critical judgments based on their own observations; on the other hand, they are encouraged to think in an innovative way, and create something unique and original.

The focus of the teachers’ informal discussion reported in this paper is a student learning project which requires the students to use music to teach English in an innovative way (Music Project thereafter). The project took place between weeks five and seven in the second semester. The purpose of the project was not on the content, but to help the students ‘get out of the box’, and think differently and creatively. In the second week of the Music Project, the teaching team announced that the project was to be extended from two weeks to three weeks, based on the advice of the foreign expert in the department who felt that the students’ potential had not been fully developed. Therefore, an outdoor seminar session was arranged during the extended week, which gave the students full autonomy to decide what they would like to do. As soon as the news was announced, different voices and opinions started to be floated. Some students felt it was a waste of time to ‘listen to music’ for three weeks, while some other students thought it might be a ‘transformational’ experience for them. Not only students, but also the teachers in the department, had different opinions and concerns. It is within such a multi-voiced and multi-scripted context that this episode is situated.

### IV. Teachers’ informal discussion as a boundary object

The information discussion reported in this paper took place among three EFL Chinese teachers in the department. Feng is the head of the department with 17 years of teaching experience; Min is the deputy head with 4 years of teaching experience; and Qin is a new teacher. When this episode started, Qin was standing beside Min, while Feng was sitting opposite them. There were a couple of teachers on the other side of the office. From time to time, Feng also projected her voice and chatted with them, so the atmosphere was quite relaxed and casual. It was in such a situation that this episode took place, and the discussion was conducted in a low voice and in Chinese. Table 1 below summarizes the discursive

trajectory of the three EFL teachers in this episode. It shows how two models of teaching interact with each other at the discourse level and how the two activity systems mingle with each other at the end.

Throughout the discourse (see appendix), Qin showed a very strong resistance to the idea of using music in teaching, finding no connection between the music project and the CTCL course. Therefore, she positioned herself in the camp which is against the music project in all turns. Only at the end did she compromise and agree to see firstly how the project was getting on. At the beginning, Qin was quite tentative, trying to solicit opinions from her colleague Min (turn 1). However, when she realized that Min was in a different camp, she provided stronger arguments with an assertive and defiant tone in turn 5 (‘But this term, I was totally confused’). After Feng joined the discussion in turn 8, however, Qin was quite silent with only several short responses in the middle turns such as ‘right’ and ‘yes’. Her change from being ‘tentative’ to ‘aggressive’, and then to ‘silent’ and finally ‘compromising’ enacted her role as a ‘newcomer’ to the department. In terms of age, experience, and knowledge, Qin was still a ‘legitimate peripheral participant’. In the public space, such as formal meetings or discussions with the people from other work units, she rarely voiced her opinions. However, in an informal chat with her Chinese colleagues from the same work unit and with whom she had a very close relationship, Qin felt very relaxed and safe in terms of speaking up. Hence she was quite assertive at the beginning. Nevertheless, when Feng joined the discussion and took the stance that the music project was ‘generally’ related to the CTCL course in turns 13 and 19, Qin was conscious of the intervention of the leader and thus became quite silent. As Qin told me in an interview, although Feng was ‘a nice lady’ and ‘an easy-going leader’, she still felt it very important to respect her decision and authority on all occasions. Although Qin still thought the music project was ‘puzzling’ (turn 26), she favorably responded to Feng’s proposal at the end to see firstly how the project got on. To sum up, Qin’s position was very clear throughout the discourse; however, her tone and discourse behavior showed great differences between the beginning, the middle and the end. This indicates that as the youngest teacher in the workplace, Qin was still trying to appropriate herself in the hierarchical infrastructure of the community and identify herself in the power relationship in social practices.

Min’s discursive trajectory is very similar to Qin’s, but she positioned herself in the camp in favor of the music project. At the beginning, Min was quite sympathetic towards Qin (turn 2) when Qin was seeking her opinion. However, when Qin revealed her strong resistance to the music project, Min made explicit that she was actually quite keen on the idea of using music in teaching, displaying a persuading tone

Turn	Against the music project	In between	For the music project
1	Qin		
2	↓ Qin	Min	
3	↓ Qin		
4	↓ Qin		
5	↓ Qin	Feng	
6	↓ Qin		Min
7	↓ Qin		↓ Min
8	↓ Qin	Feng	↓ Min
9	↓ Qin	↓ Feng	↓ Min
10	↓ Qin	↓ Feng	↓ Min
11	↓ Qin		↓ Min
12	↓ Qin		↓ Min
13	↓ Qin		↓ Min
14	↓ Qin		↓ Min
15	↓ Qin		↓ Min
16	↓ Qin		↓ Min
17	↓ Qin		↓ Min
18	↓ Qin		↓ Min
19	↓ Qin		↓ Min
20	↓ Qin		↓ Min
21	↓ Qin	Feng	↓ Min
22	↓ Qin	Min	
23	↓ Qin		
24	↓ Qin		
25	↓ Qin	Feng	
26	↓ Qin		
27	↓ Qin	Feng	Min
28	↓ Qin	↓ Feng	↓ Min
29	↓ Qin	↓ Feng	↓ Min
30	↓ Qin	↓ Qin	

**Table 1. A summary of the dynamics of the discourse**

in turn 6. In the middle turns, she also allied herself with Feng and justified the ‘general connection’ between the music project and the CTCL course. Toward the end, however, seeing Qin was very frustrated and Feng was struggling to moderate the situation, Min also compromised. Min’s change from ‘sympathetic’ to ‘assuming a position’ and then to ‘compromising’ also enacted her role as a deputy head in the work unit. Min was officially assigned as the deputy head of the team, but she told me that she felt more comfortable being viewed as ‘the assistant to the director’ instead of ‘the assistant director’. Although she was officially granted the power, she did not see herself as a ‘powerful’ person and did not have a concrete sense of being a leader. As a result,

she was committed to her own idea and argued with Qin as an equal at the beginning. When she realized that Feng had switched her position and played her role as a moderator, she, however, seemed to realize that as a deputy head, she should not argue with Qin anymore and thus compromised in turn 27. Like Qin, Min also reacted very quickly to Feng’s proposal to ‘wait and see’ so that Feng’s face, authority and power were respected.

For Feng, her stances were uncertain and changeable throughout the discourse. Sitting opposite Min and Qin, Feng did not attempt to join the discussion at first, as indicated by the only turn at the beginning (turn 4). It was not until turn 8 that she really participated in the discussion, when she saw her

colleagues could not agree with each other. From then on, she oscillated between the two camps. When one side was too aggressive and assertive, Feng would take a stance to show her emotional support for the underprivileged side. For example, when Qin became more aggressive in turn 7, she intervened in turn 8 and showed her support for Min. Another example is her switching back to the middle position in turn 21 ('that is to say, all in all, I am in between'), noticing Qin's frustration about the 'alliance' between Min and herself. Feng did not show much preference in this episode. In most cases, she was trying to adapt herself to different situations. Her attitude was very cautious, attempting to create a harmonious atmosphere to move things forward, which could also be demonstrated by her diplomatic proposal at the end to postpone making an immediate decision. All in all, Feng's discourse in this episode delicately enacted her role as an official leader who had an ownership of the workplace and a responsibility for creating harmony so as to move things forward. Feng tended not to be partial to either side, but stayed 'right in the middle'. When she took a stance, it was for the purpose of balancing the power relationship between the participants in the discussion.

## V. Conclusion

If we apply the activity theory framework in this case, we could conceptualize the joint social practice (i.e. the informal discussion) as a boundary object that mediates the boundary-crossing process between the global and the local activity systems. The camp opposed to the music project could be conceived as the local activity system, while the camp in favor of the project the global activity system. The interaction between the two systems is reflected in the boundary-crossing 'in between' area. Qin, who complained strongly about the music project, mostly positioned herself in the local activity system. Min, who tried to justify the relationship between the music project and the CTCL course, was mostly positioned in the global activity system. In between was the group leader Feng, who switched back and forth between both systems. Her constant change of position throughout the excerpt also reflects the dynamics of the negotiation process between the global and the local in boundary-crossing. Although the group achieved intersubjectivity at the end, this outcome of negotiation could well be interpreted as a way of maintaining a harmonious relationship and respecting face, power and authority in the Chinese context when people could not agree with each other.

To conclude, drawing on a small set of discourse data, this paper illustrates that the negotiation between the global and the local is a dynamic process with 'tosses and turns' which are evidenced by Feng, Min and Qin's discursive trajectory. Although the discussants did not reach any concrete agreement, this outcome

reflects the reality of a complex environment of learning and echoes the argument the author made earlier that there are different forms and processes of negotiation, and the outcome of negotiation could be consensus or difference. In whichever case, the process of boundary-crossing creates a potential space for teacher learning in the sense that the problem is exposed for negotiation and reflection.

## VI. References

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### Appendix Excerpt of the informal discussion among three Chinese EFL teachers (Translated from original Chinese text)

Transcription Conventions (Adapted from Have, 2007: 215-216)

- [ A single left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset.
- ] A single right bracket indicates the point at which an utterance to utterance-part terminates
- = Equal signs, one at the end of the one line and one at the beginning of a next, indicate the 'gap' between the two lines. This is often called latching.
- (.) A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny 'gap' within or between utterances.
- :: Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged sound.
- <> Right/left carets bracketing an utterance indicate speeding up.
- (word) Parenthesized words are especially dubious hearings or speaker identifications.

**Participants:** F – Feng M – Min Q– Qin

1. Q: I know what he talked about today, but what I mean is what is the relationship between what he talks about each time and the curriculum and the theme of the whole term. Is there on earth a main thread? If he really wants to teach the students creative so and so learning and critical thinking::: What do you think? (Her head slightly turned to Min)
2. M: I am also thinking today. What is the relationship between what he talked [about today and 'creative' and 'critical']?
3. Q: [Yes], he just introduced a method. He could well introduce this method to the students (in other classes) gradually. It is unnecessary to [talk about this content] in (.) this class.
4. F: Em!
5. Q: He could well save the time to talk about other things, though :: it could be more extensive if this is taught by him. But how on earth is his class related to our programme. I think, the feeling is ... It is especially obvious this term. Last term, I still thought the connection was very close. We did quite a good job and were quite happy with the Educational Theories course last term, but this term, I (.) was totally confused, and then I felt like caught on the wrong foot. =
6. M: = I think the whole title is about creative, <so it> could not be related to Educational studies very closely from the beginning. <Its whole title is about creative>, that is, it is quite general.
7. Q: I know, I know. I am not saying] that it should definitely have some relationship with educational studies, but that if you have decided this topic, your lecture (.) each time should revolve around this theme. <Either this or that, or both in combination.> But don't, say, stray away from this theme, or
8. F: I want to say that he does not necessarily stray away from the [theme].
9. M: [Em..]
10. F: It is just that the things (.) that he has done are not particularly... That is to say, not particularly. <I, I, I, that is to say>, I understand what you mean in general.
11. M:<That is to say it is related in some way>. (That is anything could be related in some way.)
12. Q: But all things are related.
13. F: The point is, it seems that even if we don't do these activities and do other activities, [it is still related.]
14. Q: [Yes.]
15. M: [Right.]
16. F: [<Many things could be related>. Anyway, it is all about thinking, right?]
17. M: [Yes.]
18. Q: [Em.]
19. F: As long as you think, it is all creative thinking.
20. M: Em, there should be this kind of element in it anyway.
21. F: But <I> also sort of agree to Qin's opinion. That is to say, (all in all, I am) in between. (.) I just feel this thing (.). Sometimes, I wonder whether Richard himself is also struggling a lot? =
22. M: = <Yes, I think that he is not very clear himself.> [He just (.) improvises an explanation to something during the week.
23. F: He is also struggling
24. Q: Actually, I think, at least he. If you want to develop this course, at least you should have many reference books in this area. If you don't, you should not every time, and then (.) add together. [I think these things (.)].]
25. F: [Just now I wanted to say] that I don't think listening to the music is very good.]
26. Q: [Right, right. It is puzzling.]
27. M: Since it is listening, just do it in the listening class ((Laughter)). Listen to the song and then appreciate it.
28. F: Anyway, we'll see! .
29. M: [Let's see how it is getting on. We'll see!]
30. Q: [We will see.]