

Cultural historical activity theory and systems thinking: a marriage to be arranged?

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The organisational learning and systems dynamics theoretical discourse is littered with debates about how - or whether - organisations learn, and what is the relationship between the learning of organisations and the learning of individuals within them. At the same time the operational side of the discourse contains much consideration of how to make sense of unintended effects that often emerge from practical experiences of the use of the systems thinking tools.

The authors of this paper argue that many of these theoretical and practical problems can be understood as a function of the current dominance of theories of learning and cognition which are individualistic and behaviourist. They go on to suggest that the cultural-historical activity theory of Vygotsky and Leont'ev, applied to organisations through the Developmental Work Research of Engestrom and others, is a body of learning theory which is much more useful when trying to understand individual and group learning in organisational settings, and how and why the intervention tools of systems dynamics work