Preface

The title of the book covers a variety of activities, environments, settings, and contexts. The title also suggests a common theoretical-conceptual approach to contemporary cultural-historical activity theory. The topic fits the needs and abilities of modern man because of the impact of activity systems, globalization, and cultural integration. More specifically, the contents of the book unfold contemporary resources of collective endeavors. One reason for choosing a shared individual and collective theme is to learn about the impact of computer-supported instrumentalism. The new technology poses a threat to traditionally acknowledged resources like coordination, cooperation, and co-construction between people. Therefore, there are cultural-historical experiences to share between people who use their ability to communicate as an impetus to systemic innovation of shared activities operating for the good of communities, societies, and nations. From one point of view families, teams, orchestras, courts of law, hospitals, etc. are self-regulating human organizations. From another point of view—which the contents of this book suggests—many approaches to learning enable “change agents” to support, coordinate, study, understand, redesign, manipulate, and improve practices.

General activity theory is a thriving approach to reach highly esteemed objectives, provided they encompass collaboration, learning plus social, and material development. Adding to the wide range of organizational concepts like demand-ability and need-resources, this book contains context-specific methods and empirical cases in 21 chapters on teacher education, modern languages, ICT, music making, vocational training, outdoor science, social work, business activity, industry, global organization, physical education, religious people, Kindergarten, and European expatriates. Other chapters are directed towards relating old philosophy to current approaches and positioning of activity theory in contemporary society.

The target audience of the book consists of theorists and practitioners of organized human activities (i.e. academics and consultants, tutors and doctoral students, teachers and pupils, management and staff, leaders and followers, doctors and patients, therapists and clients, businessmen and customers, plus parents and children).

One section on “Information and Communication Technology” covers the authors’ accounts of projects in contexts of Icelandic teacher education, Web-based exchanges between Russian and Swedish school children, classroom designs for learning among Danish pupils, and game construction in Swedish higher education. A section on “Education” contains chapters on music making in higher education, vocational training in upper secondary schools, teaching and learning of a foreign language, and science and mathematics in teacher education. A third section on “Work Practices” displays Finnish examples of adult behavior in predominantly international business activities. One of them is about social work; another chapter is about adaptation to a global market, and then there is a chapter about industrial networking cooperation and supervision. The final contribution on work practices is on the effect of globalization
on contents of work. A section on “Methodology” covers a variety of themes and subjects (e.g. initiatives for improving physical education, understanding religious people, creativity in Kindergarten, meetings between European cultures, and teaching and learning in mathematics). A fifth section covers comparison between inspirations to “Philosophy of Activity Theory,” introducing a chapter on European “giants” like Vygotsky, Heidegger, and Gadamer by means of a concept alluding to Vygotsky’s ZoPD, here called hermeneutic Zone of Proximal Development. There is a similar chapter comparing Marx and Leontjev with Bourdieu and Foucault by focusing on the concept of cultural, political, and scientific capital. A chapter closing this section clarifies the highly esteemed concept of activity as traditionally used among proponents of activity theory. References and arguments relative to the roots of the concept provide valuable insights to the current meaning of the concept.

The sections and chapters of this book verify the fact that the chosen topic describes a wide scale where people share a deep understanding of human activity. In a section on “Information and Communication Technology,” Thurídur Jóhannsdóttir focuses on mediated behaviour and established practices among Icelandic student teachers. The chapter, “Responsive Practices in Online Teacher Education,” displays an account of educational challenges and opportunities enabled by the technology bridging geographical and possibly mental distances between pupils, class teachers, and student teachers in rural schools.

In the second chapter, “Young Learners: Communication and Digital Tools,” Fia Andersson and Stellan Sundh have composed a chapter based on a project on young learners’ development, cross-national communication, and the use of digital tools. The purpose of a cross-national project is to bring students together by combining curricular goals with cultural differences. In addition, communication on the Web between students with different cultural backgrounds enables learning English as a foreign language.

Next, there is a chapter on “Learning in Video-Mediated Classes.” Karen Andreasen and Palle Rasmussen focus on the context of higher education in a chapter that outlines some of the principles of online teaching and learning. This chapter presents a combined approach to studying and developing classroom activity and video-mediated exchanges. Analysis of student behaviors is supported by Etienne Wenger’s theory about learning. The impact on teaching and learning by the specifically situated design, distribution, proximity, etc. of educational classroom resources is also analyzed.

A chapter on “Game Construction Activity in Higher Education,” by Hans Kyhlbäck provides a comparative analysis of student behavior related to two ICT contexts for game construction. Another outcome of students academic design work is artifacts for the players’ amusement and joy: two separate but interrelated activities. Effects of the familiar contradiction between school-related grades, marking and examination, and becoming a professional game designer are discussed. Contextualized feedback influences positively the students’ feelings of competence, craftsmanship, and professionalism. Expansive learning enables people to learn established knowledge and contribute to new game technology.

The next section is about “Education.” Karin Johansson analyzes the planning, rehearsal, and delivery of music by a string quartet and two other constellations as perceived by the author through direct observation. She does so in a chapter called “Collaborative Music-Making and Artistic Agency.” Also included is a comparison between instrumental music making and artistic agency. Aspects of subordination and independence combined with activity theoretical analytical tools, models, and concepts help clarify some of the built-in developmental contradictions of artistic music making in higher education. The chapter covers three explicitly presented and analyzed settings where musical practice is taught and learnt. Contradictions between traditional discipline of music making and deliberative artistic creativity are also analyzed.
In “Vocational Learning Mediated by Constructive Competition,” Charlotte Jonasson outlines the effects of mediating artifacts in a vocational setting. What is the effect of the student’s intentions and motivation for learning? Another interesting aspect is to learn about the developmental relations between the vocational students’ urge to compete. Some competitive intentions are productive and others destructive. Timing of food preparation and services plus adequate choice of ingredients for cooking form zones of development for the vocational students. Furthermore, socio-material resources, values, quality of interaction, and social organization of work influence student behavior and performance.

Juanjuan Zhao has written a chapter on “Project-Based Instruction in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language.” The chapter covers an outline of action research and cultural-historical activity theory among two groups of students at a US high school. The effect of traditional teacher-centered and PBI-influenced approaches to teaching and learning Chinese are described by means of student commitment, acquisition of cultural knowledge, and communicative skills. The findings suggest that contradictions appear between approaches to teaching and learning of sentence structure, character writing, and recognition.

Oleg Popov scrutinizes “Outdoor Science in Teacher Education” as a potentially useful activity. Application of tools, tasks, and measures to management of outdoor lessons combined with cultural historical activity theory help student teachers of Science and Mathematics Education reach curricular goals. Contextual influences, learning objects, and transferability of knowledge are relevant themes related to outdoor science. Results suggest that if properly managed, outdoor science education empowers prospective science teachers to learn to deploy a range of mediating artifacts.

Anna Linge analyzes “Creative Musical Practice in an Educational Context.” Just like in Karin Andersson’s chapter, creative tensions between musical conformity and creative musical performance are analyzed from a perspective of teaching and learning. The author introduces Vygotskian concepts of association and dissociation functioning as mental tools for creative music making. Here, the concept of perezhivanie is used for analyzing and explaining tensions between formal education and freedom of artistic expression as defined by individual problem solving.

In the third section, the authors outline cultural-historical activity theory relative to “Work Practices.” Under the title “Micro-Analysis of Concepts for Developing Networking in Social Work,” Laura Seppänén and Laure Kloetzer present an emotionally laden theme exploring the practical design and effect of a using the hybrid concept of worry as a psychological tool for facilitating negotiation and problem solving in meetings between therapists and divorced families. Professional concepts serve as functional or even cross-functional mediators for improved cross-functional collaboration. The concept of worry seemed to trigger the professionals’ attempts to make sense of different contexts. Ambiguity, combined with a formal visual exercise, contributed to the professionals’ abilities to elaborate their professional perspectives.

In a chapter on work practices Päivi Ristimäki investigates the interplay between technology-push and demand-pull in a Finnish firm. The purpose of the longitudinal study, here labeled “Explorative Actions in Search of a New Logic of Business Activity,” is to describe influences of reorientation of the main activity and adaptation to a changing market. Therefore, the firm takes explorative action in their relation to potential customers. Understanding exploration and exploitation of products and relations for forming and implementing new business logic become the focused activity of research. Dialectic contradictions between sales of a technological product and expertise is another focus of the research.

In “Networking around Supervisors in an Industrial Cooperation,” Riikka Ruotsala deploys analytical concepts like double stimulation, mediating artifact and agented action in a systemic analysis and explanation of client understandings of workplace support and supervision. The project covers the employees’
problem statements, explanation modes, and solution ideas coupled with data collection generated by a developmental intervention. Emphasis is on methodology and the project strategy is to start off by introducing abstract theory and move to concrete practice. Another methodological choice is to distinguish between ontology relative to metaphysics of properties, metaphysics of relations, and dialectics.

Hanna Toiviainen reports on development in an international business environment defined as a global workplace. The title of the chapter is “Interventions for Learning at Global Workplaces.” The author analyzes meetings between Asian-Chinese and European-Finnish cultures and describes how different cultures pose challenges and offer solutions for employees who are supposed to collaborate in order to meet market demands for productivity and well-being.

The next section is called “Methodology” and one chapter is about “Subject Matter Analysis in Physical Education.” Carolina Piccetti-Nascimento provides an analysis of educational concepts, clarifying their practical meaning and outlining relations between bodily movement and communication. Subject matter analysis of physical education (Dance and Game) help clarify to teachers, student teachers, and teacher educators how abstract thinking and concrete practices potentially enhance the quality of teaching and learning. A cultural historical perspective on physical training supported by concepts of **essence, movement from abstract to the concrete, historical analysis, and theoretical concepts** lies at the heart of the study.

Another chapter is titled “Modeling and Analyzing Contextual Influences.” Thomas Hansson focuses on traditional methodology for collecting data plus analysis of situated influences on people’s behaviors, more specifically on behaviors that appear during interviews between students of Pedagogy and missionaries working in the Nordic countries. Complementary data consists of discourses between missionaries interviewing citizens for religious purposes. Results suggest that the respondents’ answers relate to the data collecting context rather than to the agreed topic of the interview (e.g. workplace learning, saving people, or values).

M. Nilsson, B. Ferholt, A. Jansson, and K. Alnervik investigate the impact of Vygotskian creativity on exploratory learning during Kindergarten play and imagination in a chapter called “Creativity in Education: Play and Exploratory Learning.” The contents of the chapter cover the findings of three school projects. The authors’ approach builds on a combination between cultural-historical activity theory and post-modern writings. A formative intervention into the children’s play worlds by researchers and teachers together shows—in one project—that imagination and realistic thinking are related processes.

In a chapter called “Acculturation Processes and Expatriate Behavior,” Laurie Watts and Beata Gullberg outline European ex-patriots’ acculturation processes as they adapt to their employers’ workplace cultures during the first years of their employment abroad. Some of the findings clarify the academic functionality of a mixed methods approach and also clarification of the interviewees’ practical everyday experiences of food and language.

Inger Eriksson’s focus in a chapter called “Constitution of Objects in DWR Activity” is on developmental methodology in general and on constitution of objects in particular. The described context consists of interventionist research displayed as three case studies into teaching and learning of mathematics involving cooperation (planning, management, and evaluation) between class teachers and researchers.

The last section is on “Philosophy of Activity Theory.” Leena Kakkori and Rauno Huttunen introduce the concept of hermeneutic zone of proximal development, suggesting an affiliation between philosophical “giants” that helps explain moral development in man. In a chapter describing “Vygotsky, Heidegger, and Gadamer on Moral Development,” they say language is something other than a vehicle for communication. Intertwined relations between thought and language are in constant movement back and forth in a dialogical process. Relations between language and thought go from external speech to thinking
and from thinking to external speech. Human morality oscillating between an individual internal world and a public external world is a process of play-acting or a happening of truth. The authors’ concept of hermeneutic zone of proximal development builds on Vygotsky’s theory of ZPD, origins of thought and language, and Heidegger’s theories.

Lars Bang offers a line of reasoning called “Mapping [Capital v.2.0]: An Encounter of Thoughts.” The chapter is an attempt at revealing stunted as well as normal games going on between people. In doing so, the author vivisects and reveals inner causality and logic related to late capitalism in contemporary society. The author’s ultimate purpose is to integrate capital into psychology and activity theory. A map of capital defines a series of events as a stunted game of locked structures and rigid causalities.

Regi Theodor Enerstvedt provides an account of past and current theorizing of the “contents” of theory of activity in a chapter called “Reflections on the Theory of Activity.” The author scrutinizes the historical background of the concept, definitions, spread, and usefulness for critical psychology, plus implications for productive practices. People hold opinions, present arguments, and draw conclusions about the underlying theory and choice of method for making the concept of activity operational to research.

In conclusion, the impact of general activity theory on the field of organizational development is substantial because of the limited resources for human and material growth offered by mass media, globalization, and information technology. Much too often, current ICT interfaces, designs, and communications build on rigid structures, limiting modes of expression and futile exchanges. Contrary to designs for conservative-superficial cooperation, general activity theory is an operational method for open-ended intervention, as well as for in-depth analysis of human practices. This is where the power of the approach lies, regardless if labeled Vygotskian School, activity theory, general activity theory, cultural-historical activity theory, developmental work research, theory of activity, research on activity, development and learning, or other.

Thomas Hansson
Blekinge Institute of Technology, School of Management, Sweden