Chapter 8
The ‘Context’ Pole

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OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter will try to answer the following questions:

• How can ‘context’ be defined and taken into account in the case of distance language learning?
• How can ascertain that all the components of this pole can be made to work coherently?

Experimental evidence suggests that the context in which learning environments operate plays such a significant part that it becomes necessary to regard it as just another pole in the didactic ergonomics model. Indeed, as any of the other poles we have described so far, it imposes constraints upon the various actors of the teaching/learning situation and is made to evolve as a result of its interactions with the rest of the system.

Several questions are therefore raised: what is exactly meant by ‘context’? How can it be defined? How can its evolution be understood when confronted to technological, pedagogic, or social innovations?

In the first step, we will consider how to define context in a systemic and sociological perspective. In order to make the nature of this pole more explicit, we will resort to organizational sociology which will help us analyze the structural and functional aspects of the specific system formed by distance language learning environments.

In the second step, we will focus on the conditions of change and innovation in contexts and review the various paradigms and results in psycho-sociology.

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and education sciences related to change, innovation and the role of active minorities.

Then, we will examine the conditions for innovation to take place and the means to support it through its various actors so as to understand how social change takes place.

Finally, considering that theory is inseparable from practice, we will present a final synthesis of the various paths that can be taken to reconcile them. In our case, this means suggesting a supporting framework combining research and action, theoretical models and directions for action: this leads to an action-research training scheme whose function consists in the mutual evaluation and regulation of researchers and practitioners.

DEFINING CONTEXT

Introduction

The first obvious remark should be: there is no such thing as the context. Indeed, the main characteristic of any context is that it is unique, even if one can observe regularities from one context to the other. Provocative as the previous lines may seem, the first question is how to define context.

To try and answer this question, it seems important to us to insist on the complexity of context(s) analysis. Any attempt at describing a complex organizational reality by decomposing it into separate constituent parts would necessarily be reductive, hence our choice to avoid such an analytical approach by opting for a systemic vision. Defining context seems to us to mean analyzing the organization system in which distance language learning environments are set.

Socio Organizational Approach of the Context

Works by the French School of organization sociology and especially by Michel Crozier offer a privileged insight into what we here refer to as ‘context’. This approach to organization sociology focuses on the strategic analysis of human and social organizations.

Strategic analysis aims at a better comprehension of human environments, of how collectivities work. In sociological terms, such organizations should be understood as any human collectivity centered on a specific activity. Defining them implies understanding the multiple relationships involved within the system as well as between internal and external elements. It also means analyzing the links and relationships between the various levels of the decision making process and operation. Finally, it supposes analyzing the social actors’ behaviors from the perspective of their capacity to act, as distinct from the psychological angle of their motivations.

These analyses reveal a multiplicity of systems of concrete action systems (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977) linked to a variety of goals and strategies. It is postulated that goals are different for individuals and groups, which entails different strategies and variable degrees of uncertainty. Power and capacities of action are flexible notions: the solutions given to a problem necessarily favor certain actors to the detriment of others.

Organization sociologists have shown that the dynamism of organized collective action is not a natural phenomenon but a social construct whose emerging and supporting conditions must be explained.

...Organizational issues, the modes of our collective organization are not naturally given [...] they are only specific solutions which relatively autonomous actors, with their own individual resources and capacities, created, invented to solve the problems raised by collective action, and most notably the essential problem of their cooperation, so as to achieve common goals in spite of their diverging orientations1. (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977, p.13)
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