

Peer Review: Video Cameras As Teachers: Toward the Transformation of Student-School  
Relationships in High School

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This peer review is in response to a request by THEN Journal Associate Editor Remi Holden. I was asked to review the submission for publication, based on the following criteria:

- Overall originality, significance, and contribution to knowledge about education and technology
- Cohesiveness: do the ideas, conclusions, frameworks, assumptions, and/or evidence all "hang together"?
- Scholarliness: Does the piece demonstrate an appropriate amount of reflectivity, inquiry, and/or connections to other relevant work?
- Quality of writing: Is the piece sufficiently clear and engaging for a reader?
- Any other point that seems relevant to the particular piece.

My review of the submission is based on my expertise as a student in multimedia, with my own doctorate research in the area of virtual worlds and identity. I also have worked in virtual and physical worlds as a live events promoter, using streaming media and video to present live performance. Finally, my professional position within the University as an Assistant Director for Online Learning uniquely equips me with the ability to assess the work of others in this area. My previous academic work also includes the presentation of a paper on Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which the author uses as part of his theoretical perspective.

## Peer Review

Everyone who writes for an academic journal is charged with adding to the scholarly body of work on the subject. This particular article tries to use complex frameworks such as Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Actor Network Theory to present an argument about the agency of video cameras in student-school relationships. The presentation is lacking key features of a scholarly work and as a result should not be accepted for publication without significant revisions.

### *Overall Originality*

The subject matter is timely; websites such as YouTube have made the creation and presentation of visual media almost ubiquitous. Mobile devices with the ability to capture video have made almost anyone who owns a cell phone able to become a video ethnographer. Dr. Mark Wesch at Kansas State University is a significant researcher and lecturer on this topic and yet this submission doesn't mention video in the larger context of social media and there is no mention of Dr. Wesch. These aren't fatal errors but the introduction is lacking any explanation as to *why* video is becoming so important as a learning and story-telling tool.

### *Cohesiveness*

The author relies on two complex frameworks: Activity Theory and Actor-Network Theory. In only looking at the former from a graphical point of view, there is not enough background on this theory to even begin to take the reader on the journey of making the quantum leap from the use of a video camera as an artifact or tool to assigning agency to an inanimate object (see figure 1):

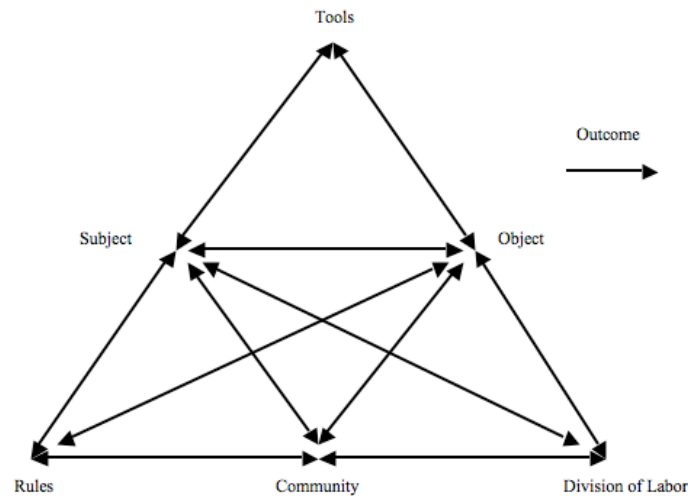


Figure 1

*CHAT Framework (From University of Helsinki Center for Activity Theory)*

In reviewing the author's brief description of Latour (1996), he writes:

*“There are only actors—actants—any one of which can only ‘proceed to action’ by association with others who may surprise or exceed him/her/it” (p. 237). This perspective emphasizes that the potential for action resides in the artifact—the camera in this case—as well as in the person and can be manifest only in the context of a camera, a camera operator, and a subject to be recorded.”*

My own review of the author's Latour citation, perhaps a better quote would have been,

*“Objects could only appear in three modes: as invisible and faithful tools, as the determining superstructure and as a projection screen. As tools they faithfully transmit the social intention that traverses them, without taking anything from them or adding anything on to them. As infrastructures, they interconnect and form a*

*continuous material base over which the social world of representations and signs subsequently flows.”*

In either case, CHAT theory (as I understand it) doesn't assign the role of agent to a video camera that is being used by a student (subject) in the pursuit of an outcome. I question if the author of this article has a substantial enough mastery of this theory to base his presentation upon it.

In looking at the Miettinen (2000) contribution, the author states:

*“The principle of generalized symmetry” is the central tenet of Actor-Network Theory (Miettinen, 2000, p. 181), thus things are viewed as equally central to an activity as the people and a camera can take on the role of a teacher.”*

I am not seeing the same point made in that reference. What I do see leads me to understand Miettinen a little differently:

*“It is suggested that the historically developed, artifact-mediated structure of human activity is instrumental in studying interaction and coevolution of social and material entities.”*

*“Nonhuman entities are included in the analysis of historically developed arrays of tools and raw materials of the activity systems.”*

*“The innovation process should be studied as a simultaneous development of an artifact and a network of actors connected to it.”*

While I agree with the author that an artifact (in this case the video camera) can be the embodiment of the collective history of its users, I don't see where the role of a teacher is assigned to the camera, enabling the author to make statement such as, “how video cameras teach,” “the camera guided and gave purpose to their actions,” “without any incentives or

assignments, the camera guided and shaped the students' movements." These are giant theoretical leaps without an in-depth study of the literature.

### *Scholarliness*

The author includes a heading called "Teaching Movement" where there is what seems to be an undocumented observation of student behavior. Was this part of a study, or was this description something fictional to illustrate the use of video cameras in the classroom? Statements such as, "In this way, cameras teach movement by creating a demand for a subject, and together, a camera and student form a pair that are granted permission to move." What is the basis for this statement? Were the students who were part of this (if it was indeed a study, although no description if such is given) asked if this was their perception?

The author also gives a detailed description of video equipment and the difference between consumer and professional video cameras, but one is lost as to why this is significant. It would have been better to devote that space to a deeper discussion of Activity Theory, in the hopes of communicating how a video camera goes from artifact to agent.

### *Quality of Writing*

The article makes unexplained leaps from a (too) brief foundation on theory, to an unsupported observational study (if that is what it was), to a description of video equipment, to how the camera assumes the role of teacher. This is not a fluid or well supported argument and may not persuade the reader to accept the writer's position as worthy of merit.

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