2. Actor/Activity

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides definitions for *actor* and *activity* that are relevant to their current use in technical and professional communication. *Actor* is defined in part as "A person who performs or takes part in any action; a doer," while *activity* is defined in part as "Things that a person, animal, or group chooses to do" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Both of these—agents and the things that they do—have been central to technical and professional communication (TPC) theory and **research** since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when TPC researchers began applying theories and methodologies from the social sciences to better understand technical and professional communication in practice. This turn to the social sciences entailed naming and describing social phenomena, among which are *actor* and *activity*.

The term *actor* has been used in several related senses to denote a social agent, which (as we'll see below) may or may not be an individual human being working with intentionality. Most generically, researchers have referred to individual writers and readers as "social agents" (Schryer 1993, 2000). But actor has been used in more specific ways grounded in particular theoretical stances. For instance, in sociocognitive approaches such as activity theory, situated cognition, and community of practice theory, the agent has been understood as an individual human being exercising individual agency within a specific sociocultural milieu. In posthumanist approaches such as actor-network theory, distributed cognition, the extended mind hypothesis, and new materialist theory, the agent can be human or nonhuman, and its agency is understood as networked or relational, i.e., emerging from the relationships among actors.

In activity theory (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), an actor is specifically understood as a human being engaged in collective labor. Activity theory is essentially a sociocultural theory of human development within the context of cyclical, collective labor activity, and thus the term actor always refers to an individual human being who is engaged in that collective labor process. For instance, in their investigation of texts in a primary care clinic, Dawn Opel and William Hart-Davidson (2019, p.363) define the actors as human beings, including "providers in that same clinic, other providers such as specialists, pharmacists, home health aides, family members, and the patient herself." These actors are understood as separate from nonhumans such as tools, instruments, and infrastructure. Similarly, Kathleen Gygi and Mark Zachry (2010) studied how "a small group of industry professionals from a transnational corporation and academic researchers (the authors of this article) exchanged ideas about a project" (p.359). In this case, the actors were

identified as human beings, specifically human beings who interacted in order to develop the project's object ("a communication workshop for engineers," p.359). (For other examples, see Artemeva & Freedman, 2001; Bazerman et al., 2003; Haas, 1999; Hart-Davidson et al., 2008; McNely, 2009, 2019; Russell, 1997a; Sun, 2006.) Similarly, other sociocognitive approaches such as situated cognition and community of practice theory treat the agent as an individual human, although one who is thoroughly socialized (and not coincidentally, these approaches were lumped in with activity theory in the early to mid-2000s; see Artemeva, 2005; Tardy, 2003; Wegner, 2004).

In contrast, in actor-network theory (ANT), an actor is not necessarily a human being: Any human or nonhuman entity can be understood as exerting agency. ANT rejects classic sociological explanations that presume human agency and social structures and use them as ready-made explanations for observed phenomena (Latour, 1996, pp. 199-200), instead positing that human and nonhuman actors should be treated alike when considering how controversies are settled (Latour, 1987, p. 144). In this approach, actors are considered network effects rather than pre-existing entities (Law, 1994, pp. 33-34); they interdefine each other (Callon, 1986). Technical and professional communicators working in this vein have examined how actors emerge and exert agency. In Jason Swarts' (2010) study of recycled writing, for instance, he argues that when writers reuse writing, they *rhetorically* mobilize a range of actors that include people, policies, and *style* guides, aligning these actors to tap into the combined agency of the assemblage. (For other examples, see Dush, 2015; Fraiberg, 2017; Graham & Herndl, 2013; Potts, 2009, 2010; Potts & Jones, 2011; Read, 2016; Read & Swarts, 2015; and Jeff Rice, 2012.) Similarly, posthumanists or new materialists also use *actor* to refer to humans and nonhumans as they work in assemblages (Boyle, 2016; Gries, 2015; Mara & Hawk, 2010; Jenny Rice, 2012; see McNely et al., 2015 for an overview), as do those working with distributed cognition (e.g., Angeli, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2001; Swarts, 2006; Winsor, 2001).

Thus, in technical and professional communication, the term *actor* can be used in at least two senses: as an individual human working in a community to get something done (for instance, when writing a technical manual that tells an individual how to solve a bounded problem) or as a constructed bundle of agency emerging from the relationships of humans and nonhumans (for instance, when writing a handbook for an organization or workgroup, describing collective norms, tools, and infrastructure). These two senses are not necessarily exclusive.

The term *activity* has largely been used in technical and professional communication in reference to activity theory. This theory developed in the Marxist-Leninist milieu of the Soviet Union, and consequently understands organized human activity within the frame of labor. The term references the German "Tätigkeit (which has the synonyms work, job, function, business, trade, and doing) and distinguishes it from Aktivität" (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 201), which is activity in a broader sense. Based on this distinction, activity theory's originators

used the Russian term "*predmetnaya deyatel'nost'*', usually translated as 'object-oriented activity'" (Bakhurst, 2009, p. 202). In activity theory, an activity is a bounded, relatively durable instance of labor in which a subject (or actor) transforms a material object with the help of mediating instruments (Engeström, 1987). Activity theory entered technical and professional communication discussions in the mid-1990s when it was picked up by writing studies researchers such as Charles Bazerman, Carolyn Berkenkotter, Christina Haas, and David R. Russell by way of Yrjo Engeström (1987).

Since it described organized labor activity with definite boundaries, and since it encouraged focus on mediating instruments such as texts, this concept of activity was a strong fit for analyzing the qualitative case studies that began to fill technical and professional communication journals in the 1990s and 2000s. In such studies (Artemeva & Freedman, 2001; Bazerman et al., 2003; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Bracewell & Witte, 2003; Freedman & Smart, 1997; Haas & Witte, 2001; Kain & Wardle, 2005; Spafford et al., 2006; Walker, 2004; see Russell, 1997b for a review up to 1997), activity—often portrayed as an activity system with subjects or actors, mediating instruments or tools, an object or object(ive), rules, community, and division of labor—provided an analytical language suitable for dissecting context: bounding a case or a rhetorical situation via productive consensual orientation of a community to an object(ive). This notion of activity has given technical and professional communication practitioners a grounded framework for understanding and describing context in cases such as designing new content management systems (McCarthy et al., 2011), understanding user-generated documentation (Sherlock, 2009), identifying how texts support different functions in an organization (Jones, 2016), or developing engineering communication workshops (Gygi & Zachry, 2010).

With this background, we can understand some key debates around the terms as well as some key limitations.

For *actor*, the key debate is what counts as an actor. In earlier technical and professional communication research, the term typically represented an individual. In later research, the term came to additionally represent organizational roles; in some research, it also represents nonhuman or posthuman agents (e.g., Sackey et al., 2019). These different meanings of actor—as an individual agent vs. a networked agent defined through its relations—require different theoretical and methodological apparati as well as different understandings of how agency relates to intentionality. In technical and professional communication, we have come to generally recognize agency as distributed, but we have not yet come to agreement on how it is distributed or how it relates to intentionality. For instance, we may recognize that as individuals learn a **genre**, they learn to participate in an ongoing activity. But in this case, do we consider the genre to be the residue of human agency, or should the genre itself be considered an agent (cf. McNely, 2019)?

The tension between the two senses of actor (as individual vs. networked agent), then, can cause occlusion or obstruction, especially as the term becomes

more deeply sedimented in technical and professional communication. The senses are difficult to reconcile, and sometimes readers must check citations to determine which meaning is operant in a given source.

For *activity*, one key debate is how to bound an activity. When activity theory was introduced to technical and professional communication in the 1990s, the notion of activity provided a more structured, developmental, and objective-oriented alternative to vague terms such as "context," performance-oriented frameworks such as Burke's pentad, or concepts for describing social clusters such as "discourse communities." Specifically, it provided a way to bound qualitative case studies, one that goes beyond spatial, demographic, and organizational groupings to identify how people work together over time. (However, commentators have questioned how well this bounding works in practice, with some alleging that the activity system functions as both phenomenon and analysis; see Bracewell & Witte, 2003; Witte, 2005.) Yet activity theorists have steadily expanded the notion of activity, both spatially and temporally, resulting in case studies with larger bounds and arguably less precision (see Spinuzzi, 2011). In technical and professional communication, this expansion has sometimes resulted in "activity" being used vaguely and generically, essentially as a substitute for "context."

Another key debate is the question of the applicability of activity. As mentioned, the notion of activity is grounded in labor activity, which (in accordance with the Soviet outlook) was taken to be the very thing that makes us human (Engels, 1971; Leontyev, 2009) and thus was understood as universally applicable—that is, all human activity is rooted in labor activity. But this claim is not universally accepted: It is grounded in the Soviet outlook, which was modernist and instrumentalist. Thus, we should not be surprised that the concept of activity has sharp limits when applied to aspects of life beyond recurrent, bounded, collective efforts that are mediated by instruments. Specifically, associative and less structured forms of interaction are not well addressed by the term *activity*. For instance, although activity theory can clearly bound cases of collaborative work on a Wikipedia page (Slattery, 2009; Walsh, 2010), the Wikipedia *community* has less certain boundaries (Jones, 2008; Swarts, 2009; cf. Jemielniak, 2015); in such cases of social and peer production, the boundaries appear to fade away (Engeström, 2009). Similarly, phenomena that are not well defined by local object-oriented activity, such as ***public*** argumentation and structural racism, are not well modeled by activity theory. Finally, due to its instrumental labor focus, activity theory has trouble modeling and analyzing non-instrumental relations (see Miller, 2007 for a critique and Spinuzzi, 2008 for an extended discussion), and it "lacks a political edge" or critical analysis of politics suitable for cultural studies (Sun, 2020, p. 50).

The term *activity*, then, is becoming occluded due to tensions between its origination in an instrumentalist, work-oriented branch of Soviet psychology and its application to cases that do not necessarily fit this description, particularly in a field that must take non-instrumentalist relationships into account and that must analyze more associative, less structured phenomena. As technical and professional

communication examines cultural and cross-cultural artifacts and practices (e.g., Fraiberg, 2017; Sackey et al., 2019; Sun, 2020; Walton, 2013) and **social justice** issues (Cox, 2019; Jones, 2017; Potts et al., 2019; Rose, 2016; Sackey, 2020), we can expect this term to be reexamined and rethought—or juxtaposed with different terms attached to theories that are better able to address such concerns.

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