





transformed in cyclical activity.

But by 2008, Engeström's examples seem much less bounded. For instance, Engeström described "runaway objects," which "have the potential to escalate and expand up to a global scale of influence. They are objects that are poorly under anyone's control and have far-reaching, unexpected side effects" (p. 227). Examples include global warming, narcotics, Linux, and chronic illness. Runaway objects start as small problems or marginal innovations but balloon into objects that are larger than any of the activity systems that are oriented toward (and defined by) them (p. 227). That is, objects are no longer closely bounded or material, are much bigger than the materials in which they are instantiated, are multiperspectival, and are the nexus of many different activities. Not coincidentally, they are generally not agricultural, craft, or industrial objects.

That is bad news for those of us who use 3GAT as a sociocultural approach for empirically investigating writing. This expansion of the object threatens the principled boundedness of the activity system. Without a defined object, the unit of analysis is inadequate, the case is unbounded, and the analysis is unanchored. If we expand the object indefinitely, we have a difficult time conducting principled 3GAT case studies.

I have two concerns in this article. The first is, how did we get here? How did the object run away from us, methodologically and analytically, and what are the repercussions for 3GAT studies of writing? The second is, how do we address the issue? How do we corral the runaway subject in writing studies?

#### Background: On the Life of the Object

Let us backtrack a bit to see how the object is defined and how it has been applied from Engeström's seminal 1987 book *Learning by Expanding* to the present. Here, we must delve into the mainstream of 3GAT: the works of Engeström and the interdisciplinary scholars who collaborate with him or closely follow his work. I bring in work from writing studies periodically to ground the discussion for our field.

#### The Structure of Activity

As I discussed, the object anchors the *activity system*, activity theory's unit of analysis. Drawing on earlier work such as Vygotsky and Leont'ev, Engeström (1987) first popularized the triangular representation of the activity system in Chapter 2. In the activity system, one or more subjects labor to cyclically transform an object in order to achieve an outcome. To transform the object, they use mediating instruments (physical and psychological tools). This activity takes place within a community that makes the activity meaningful, and is conducted with rules and a division of labor related to that community (see Figure 1).

#### (INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.)

The object defines the rest of the activity, which is necessary, since each point in the triangle intersects with a number of other activities. For instance, a person who serves as a subject in one activity (e.g., producing software documentation) also serves in other, unrelated activities (e.g., a political party, a church, a cosplay group). Mediating instruments used in one activity (e.g., the word processor in which the documentation is written) are also used in other unassociated activities (producing short stories or flyers for lost cats), and so on. To bound a case that may include an infinitely extensible set of associations, we need a linchpin of analysis: a sense-maker.

#### The Object as the Sense-Maker

For activity theorists, this linchpin is the object, particularly in its relation to the outcome. Kaptelinin called it "the sense-maker," which "gives meaning to and determines values of various entities and phenomena" (Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 5). Engeström, Puonti, & Seppänen (2003) declared that "the object determines the horizon of possible actions" (p. 152).

The object is both objective and projective<sup>2</sup>: both the raw materials and problems at hand and the use-value that is envisioned for those raw materials and problems. For example, the object of construction includes both the construction materials and the building they will form (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005, p. 444; cf. Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 5; Nardi, 2005). The brute earth becomes a field of grain (Engeström & Escalante, 1996, p. 360), the raw metal becomes an implement (Engeström, 1992, p. 107), the fish becomes dinner (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 63). The object is the raw material or problem space for the activity (Engeström, 1990, p. 79). It defines what counts as an activity for a particular analysis (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005, p. 444). And in doing so, it delineates "real activities realised by identifiable people in identifiable locations" (Engeström, 1987, Chapter 5).

#### The Ambiguity of the Object

And yet, despite its function as the linchpin for the activity theory analysis, the notion of the object is rather ambiguous when applied to phenomena that are less material and less concrete. Even in 1987, Engeström mixed his

<sup>2</sup> Russell (1997a) captures this double nature of the object in his term "object(ive)".





















































